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ARGOSY

JANUARY, 1955
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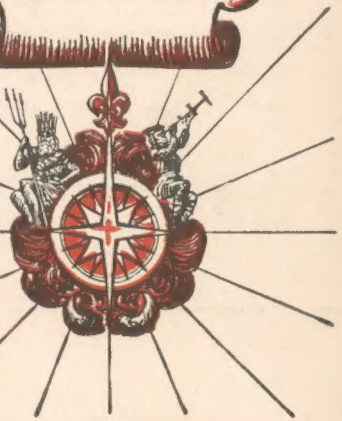

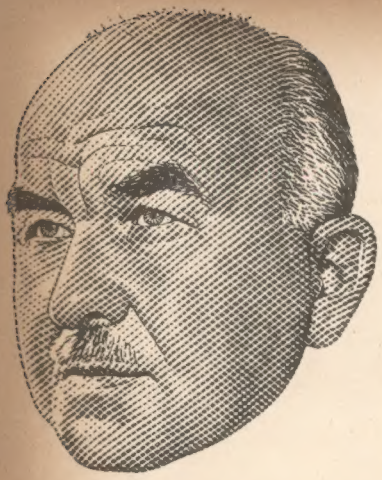

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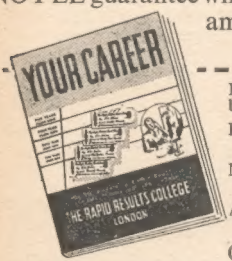

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ARGOSY

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I Saw Three Ships

AS I sat under a sycamore tree,
—A sycamore tree, a sycamore tree,
I looked me out upon the sea
On Christ's Sunday at morn.

I saw three ships a-sailing there,
—A-sailing there, a-sailing there,
Jesu, Mary, and Joseph they bare
On Christ's Sunday at morn.

Joseph did whistle and Mary did sing,
—Mary did sing, Mary did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring
For joy our Lord was born.

O they sail'd in to Bethlehem!
—To Bethlehem, to Bethlehem;
Saint Michael was the stereˋsman.
Saint John sat in the horn.

And all the bells on earth did ring
—On earth did ring, on earth did ring;
" Welcome be thou Heaven's King,
On Christ's Sunday at morn."

Author Unknown

OSKAR'S WRONG NUMBER

He entered with a joyful, full-throated urp-urp-urp

by ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES

THIS is the story of why you never hear any more of Kleinmikkel's Colossal Circus. It was Oskar the Incomparable who brought about the disaster. Oskar sports in the pool of the East Berlin Zoo, a star attraction.

As for Klaus Kleinmikkel, better not ask what became of him. In East Berlin, when the black cars of the Security Police whisk somebody away, everyone ceases to know him. After all, one has to look after one's self.

This was always Klaus Kleinmikkel's own philosophy. Back in the 'thirties when the Nazis were rising to power, the fat circus-owner rode along with them, as part-time police spy, odd-job informer. As soon as the Allied bombs began to torch Berlin, he took to the safe countryside with gaudy caravans and special permits to entertain S.S. troop camps.

The total collapse of the Reich found Klaus Kleinmikkel far inside the Russian area of occupation, although he had made frantic efforts to hurry westward. He shrugged, and quickly ingratiated himself with the new masters from Russia.

For them he was able to perform such useful services as turning in the refugees who had paid him heavily to smuggle them to freedom in his gay caravans. In return Klaus Kleinmikkel was put in charge of a hippodrome in East Berlin whose former owner had been deported to a labour camp as " non-essential."

One morning Herr K. was sitting in his office at the hippodrome. Looking out of the window, he was horrified to see a black Security Police car nosing up to his door. His heart froze as a massively important-looking official got out, looked coldly at the brightly postered façade, consulted a slip of paper, nodded grimly, and stalked in.

Expiring with terror, Herr K. made a pitiful effort at a smile; his tiny red mouth looked as though it wanted to whistle but couldn't. His jowls quivered. The police official looked through him as if through a particularly dirty window.

" Kleinmikkel, Klaus? " he rasped.

" Y-yes. Yes, Herr Kommissär," the circus man squeaked.

Miraculously, beautifully, the official smiled. He announced that he was from the Security Police—as though one could not tell at a glance—and wished to take Comrade Kleinmikkel into special confidence. Trembling with relief, Comrade K. leaned forward over his big belly, wiggling and glowing with loyalty.

The official's heavy Russian accent slurred the ungrammatical German. Comrade Kleinmikkel, he said, must have heard that Berlin was about to be honoured by a visit from no less a personage than Admiral V. I. Baranovsky, of the Soviet Navy. The visit, the official went on, was under the personal supervision of Security Police Chief Wilhelm Meisner.

Herr K. was hardly able to suppress his shudder. Baranovsky was only a remote, exotic name. But Wilhelm Meisner sat at table with every man, woman, and child in East Germany, went to school and to work and to the tavern with them, had keys to anything to which they had keys. He was totally the secret policeman, trained in Russia, twice tortured by the Nazis, a man tempered and drawn to utter perfection, above corruption, beyond mercy.

Herr K. wondered with dread just how he was to figure in the plans of such a man. His caller explained.

Chief Meisner had arranged special entertainments for the Admiral's visit of state. One highlight was to be a night at the circus—Russians being especially fond of circuses. Klaus Kleinmikkel beamed. This was opportunity knocking loudly.

The official explained in great detail, reading from a typed piece of paper, exactly how the evening was to be handled. Herr K. nodded and nodded, his round head filling up with rosy dreams. " All will be correct, Herr Kommissär," he said happily.

" *Comrade* Kommissär," the official corrected frostily. " You understand," he went on in his thick accent, " everything must be absolutely *wunderbar*. Nothing second-rate. We know a thing or two about circuses, we Russians."

Abruptly, he rose, swung on his heel, and left. Herr K. sat at the window, watching the black car stirring terror everywhere as it moved slowly down the street.

Only fifteen days remained to prepare. Carpenters from the Security Police erected gunners' perches and lined the state box with sheet steel. Herr K. worked like a navvy in the sawdust arena. Madame Vera was brusquely ordered to work up a brand-new act, a slow adagio on the slack-wire. When she and her partner protested, Herr K. only pointed grimly with his gold toothpick towards the police agents standing silently about. New costumes were whipped up in gay Russian colours. Sawdust for

the arena was dyed a jolly pink. The animals, down to the lowliest, were groomed as though for a prize competition.

At the last minute, a troop of twenty Cossack riders arrived by special train, and had to be housed, fed, and amused at Herr K.'s personal expense. Their enormous appetites hurt his very soul, but he reminded himself that this was his great chance.

One day, the spooky silence of the police and the spitting tantrums of the camels all became just too much. Herr K. left the hippodrome for a schnapps at the People's Peace Café. As he entered the crowded but silent bar, a little man sidled up to him, twitching at his sleeve.

" Klaus, my old friend," said a wispy voice.

Herr K. glanced hastily around, wondering whether or not to recognize the little man. He had heard, through the infallible circus-world grape-vine, that Bela Kurtz was on the edge of bad trouble with the Secret Police. But then, it would be very suspicious to pretend not to know a man who had addressed him by name. Herr K. licked his lips.

" How are things, Bela? " he asked. " I haven't seen you in seven years," he added in a voice loud enough for anyone listening to hear clearly.

Bela Kurtz's bright, dark eyes twinkled mockingly. He stared at Herr K.'s great belly, at the gold tie-pin, at the real Havana cigar, and something bitter came and went in his expression.

" I'm fine, Klaus," he said, " just fine."

A little ruefully, he dropped the hand that Herr K. had shown no desire to shake. They sat at a small table near other men who drank the bad drinks in contained silence. Herr K. hoped inwardly that talkative little Bela Kurtz would have sense enough to watch his tongue.

" I have to go away, Klaus," was the first thing Bela said, when the sullen waiter left after bringing the synthetic schnapps. Herr K.'s jowls paled.

" Not so loud, *Dummkopf*! " he hissed.

" As you wish, Klaus. Well, then, I wish to take a little trip for my health. There is a certain piece of property that it would be impracticable to take with me. I have to sell."

Herr K. licked his lips. People on the run sell cheap. " So? " he said non-committally.

" It's all I have left. I hate to give him up, but I will sell Oskar."

In spite of himself, Herr K.'s little eyes showed interest. All the circus world knew that Bela Kurtz was a genius with seals; his patient, affectionate skill could train them to do anything. And Oskar the Incomparable was his greatest achievement.

Herr K. shrugged, tried to look bored. "Another seal," he said deprecatingly. "What would I do with another seal?"

"You might," said Bela Kurtz tartly, "replace that sloppy lout you have now."

Circus people, Herr K. told himself bitterly, know too much about each other's business.

With the fierce pride of a theatre child's mother, Bela Kurtz thrust into Herr K.'s hand a thick batch of press clippings. Unanimously they agreed that Oskar the Incomparable was a maestro in his own right; Oskar had genius, personality—sex appeal, even.

Herr K. jabbed his thumb at a notice of Oskar's London triumph. "Before the war. You know, he isn't getting any younger."

"Oskar has as many good years ahead of him as either of us," said Bela Kurtz.

"Perhaps many more," he added grimly, looking straight across the room at a bulky man whose excellent shoes proclaimed his police connection.

Herr K. choked on his cigar. Afraid he had scared off his only possible customer, Bela Kurtz smiled lightly.

"After all, Klaus, nobody would ever know. To most people all seals look alike."

Herr K. wavered. It was true, most people could never tell one seal from another. He himself, for one, could not. And he did very much need something extra special for the Admiral's gala.

"How much?" he said.

Bela Kurtz hesitated, gulped. "One thousand English pounds," he stammered.

Herr K. almost jumped out of his seat. To mention such a thing right out loud in a public place!

"I know that you sometimes come by such—items," Bela Kurtz went on.

"Perhaps something could be arranged on those lines," said Herr K. pompously. "But certainly not more than three hundred—er—such items. No more."

"But, Klaus, I must have a thousand for my esca—my trip."

"Ah yes," said Klaus Kleinmikkel. "But if I were to drop a word in the right quarter, there would be no—trip."

Bela Kurtz sat very still. His eyes dimmed. He seemed to look through the circus man at something remote, familiar, and horrible.

"So be it, Klaus," he said. "Three hundred, then. I shall send Oskar round to your hippodrome. If you are satisfied, you

can send me the money at the Hotel October First, in Molotovstrasse."

They parted outside the café. Herr K., feeling expansive over his good bargain, offered to shake hands. This time it was Bela Kurtz who refused. "Take good care of my Oskar," he said, and walked slowly away.

Two days later, a van with two huge crates arrived at the hippodrome. In one, an elaborately padded affair, Oskar the Incomparable was barking huffily. The other contained his brushes, toys, and the huge chromium instrument he played.

Herr K. marvelled at the naïve folly of little Bela Kurtz in throwing in all the extras that had not been contracted for. The whole company gathered round the crates, standing slightly apart from Herr K., as they always did.

When the end of the padded crate was swung aside, a large seal, handsomely sleek, with no mothy spots, bounced out, urping impatiently. His huge brown eyes, intelligent and innocent, swept the company like a smile of greeting.

Catching sight of the handsome Madame Vera, he flopped gaily towards her, wriggling like a spaniel puppy. He nuzzled her neck with his velvety face and twitched his whiskers rapturously as she rubbed his ears.

From the first instant, Oskar was the undisputed star of the lot. His happy, clever face seemed to light up the great bare building and make the tinsel trimmings spark into life.

Madame Vera unravelled the sweater she had been knitting for herself with the hard-to-get real wool and started a jersey for Oskar. Madame Feuer and her husband, the lion-tamers, dropped some of their military bravado when they sat on the edge of Oskar's tank; they talked together as they had not for years. The Cossacks, simple peasant boys from the Kuban, swarmed around Oskar, petting and spoiling him with helpings from their meagre rations.

Oskar seemed to love everybody impartially; he had no politics, no nationality. Sloshing around in the tank, he always had time for a sociable moment with anyone.

He had a favourite joke of sneaking up behind people, nipping their legs very lightly and then bounding off, urp-urp-urping in an unmistakable practical joker's laugh. He did it once to Herr K. and the circus-owner slapped his face. Oskar's huge eyes looked shocked and he turned sadly away. After that, he would never play the instrument if Herr K. was anywhere in sight.

This instrument was called an electro-melodeon. It looked rather like a large chromium marimba, except that instead of

wooden keys, it had a long row of pitched electrical chimes, each one with a big mother-of-pearl button before it. Oskar played tunes—quite complicated pieces—by pressing the buttons with the tip of his nose. There was a bar, operated by his right flipper, which served much as the pedals of a piano. There was also a grand podium of chromium draped with black velvet, monogrammed with a great " O " like a royal cipher.

As soon as Herr K., hiding behind a curtain, saw Oskar rehearse, he knew that here indeed was the something extra-special for the Admiral's gala.

Oskar approached the instrument with the stunning poise and grace of a virtuoso who knows his worth. He also had that little extra touch of ham that makes a great showman. He knew just how many seconds to pause, his sleek head upraised, before bending his face to the pearl keyboard. His sense of rhythm and timing was impeccable; he had a real feeling for melody; his repertory was amazing. His flipper-clapping applause for himself at the end of a selection was enchantingly naïve. Herr K. puffed happily on his real Havana.

As the days went by, Herr K. kept putting off sending the money to Bela Kurtz. When Bela Kurtz phoned frantically, Herr K. grew increasingly brusque.

Finally he told him bluntly never to call again or come round, or he would find his trip " suddenly impossible, if you know what I mean . . ."

Two hours before the opening of the performance in honour of Admiral V. I. Baranovsky, Herr K.'s hippodrome began filling up with silent, nondescript men with good shoes and bad haircuts. They took their places at regular intervals in all the rows, forming a network of security that was supposed to be unnoticeable when the tiers were filled. In the nests overhead stood young, unsmiling Russian soldiers with the inevitable tommy-guns.

The ordinary people came in quietly. There was none of the tumult and chatter associated with circuses. Herr K. bustled importantly about, fussing at everybody, making a great show for the watchful police officials who missed nothing.

When the barnlike hall was filled, there was a long wait, filled by the band with various approved patriotic airs. Suddenly there was silence. A rustle of movement at the main entrance which had not been used all day. As one man the whole audience rose to its feet.

Twelve stocky Russian soldiers marched in, spreading fanwise about the state box, their submachine-guns smartly held across

their chests. Behind them came a cluster of subdued German Party officials who looked scrubbed, nervous, and arrogant. Then, flanked by two aides, came the Admiral himself.

Vladimir Ilyitch Baranovsky, of the Soviet Navy, chessmaster, dialectician, horseman, and sailor, looked just what he was—a ruthless, destructive, moody, lonely man. His large, well-shaped head was cropped in an ugly cut as though to distract attention from its patrician lines. His big, compact body seemed ready to burst from the tight uniform. His chest was so solidly ranged with medals there seemed no room for one more.

Following the Admiral into the state box, came the Minister responsible for the Censorship of Popular Entertainment. He pottered in diffidently, as though he expected to be asked at any moment to go and sit in the cheaper seats. The Admiral spoke to him only when the official photographers insisted.

In a back corner of the box stood Wilhelm Meisner himself, his pale, restless eyes constantly ranging the audience. The sight of that marble, ascetic face made Klaus Kleinmikkel so nervous that—unthinkable for a circus man—the smell of sawdust began to nauseate him.

The show went swimmingly. It was fast-paced, bright, and smart. There were no long delays between turns, and Herr K. managed to spread his thin material out over a big-seeming area of splashy brightness.

Madame Vera and her partner brought gasps with the new slack-wire adagio. High overhead, the trapeze artists flew about like crazy, clever birds.

The Admiral's applause was steady and loud. He sent boxes of his own black Crimean cigarettes to each member of the troupe. The spectators, always following safely in his example, applauded vociferously.

The lion-tamers, husband and wife, made the lions sit up like kittens before the state box while the Admiral threw them special titbits that would not stain his white gloves.

In the huge arena some of the haunted quality of daily life in the zone seemed for a few magical moments to be suspended. One could forget, partly anyway, the silent police, while one watched the Cossacks whose riding tricks brought the Admiral to the edge of his seat with a hard, proud glitter in his eyes.

Huge bears dressed up as Red sailors did a hornpipe-style dance, and the Admiral even went so far as to slap the Minister on the back. All the Party functionaries smiled fatuously at one another.

A crashing fanfare of drums and trumpets announced Oskar the Incomparable.

Liveried attendants solemnly rolled the glittering electro-melodeon into place in the centre of the arena, directly facing the state box. A silver champagne bucket was placed at the Admiral's elbow, containing a large fish wrapped in a napkin.

The fanfare rose mightily. Curtains at one side slowly opened, and Oskar came bounding across the arena along a scarlet carpet. He entered with a joyful, full-throated urp-urp-urp. Even in that place of hidden fears and hatreds Oskar's pure jollity was infectious.

Oskar was wearing a white full-dress shirt-front with pearl studs, wing collar, and correct white tie. He mounted the velvet-draped podium, looked brightly around the full circle of the audience, bowed, as they had taught him, to the state box, then to the audience. He tossed his head in a perfect parody of the hair-tossing mannerisms of the more glossy concert artists.

The Admiral grinned broadly, displaying big teeth not unlike Oskar's. Wilhelm Meisner's terrible pale eyes flicked a sign of approval at Herr K., who began to see all sorts of important doors opening for him.

He felt so good that for a brief moment he almost decided to pay something to little Bela Kurtz.

Oskar gleamed sleekly in the spotlights; he had been brilliantined, because seals when dry do not have the satiny black look that the public expects. Posing for an instant, Oskar plunged into his first number, a mazurka.

He poked happily at the bell-buttons, the intelligent head swinging gracefully to and fro, his flipper working the tone-lever that gave added colouring to the music.

The mazurka set the Admiral's feet tapping. Dutifully, every foot in the hippodrome began tapping in unison.

Oskar, very sensitive to audience-reaction, tapped his own tail flippers with them.

When the number was over, the Admiral applauded and inclined his head graciously with what looked suspiciously like a royal nod.

Oskar looked modestly around, then straight at the Admiral, his enormous brown eyes brimming with enjoyment, the pure, vivid enjoyment of a performer who knows that he is "going over." Oskar fussed at his shirt-front and tie with a flipper, pretended to shake invisible locks, and launched into the Chopin *Polonaise Militaire.*

Watching the state box, Herr K. ascended on pink clouds; V. I. Baranovsky, Admiral of the Soviet Navy, was openly humming. The pale eyes of Wilhelm Meisner sent Herr K. another tiny flick of approval.

Oskar, a ham to the heart, responded from that heart to the growing enthusiasm of the people. His big eyes glowed brighter, his urp-urp-urp was irresistibly gay. He and the Admiral beamed at each other like fond brothers. The Admiral tossed the fish—rising to do so—and Oskar caught it in mid air with a fine flourish of his head. He winked at the Admiral and applauded himself with his flippers.

The tension in the arena had almost wholly evaporated. It was as though everyone had discovered that there really was a Santa Claus, after all; that all the world after the age of six was just a silly, wicked dream.

Herr K. took the pulse of the crowd and he knew he had a very good thing.

So far, Oskar had been following the lead of the conductor. Intoxicated with his success, he decided to do his Big Number.

He took his position before the electro-melodeon without even looking at the conductor, who glanced at Herr K. for instructions. The circus-owner signalled him to let Oskar proceed on his own.

Oskar savoured the moment, gathered his forces, and swooped his head towards the shining instrument. His eyes popped with concentration because he had not played this piece for a long time . . .

At the first bars, a nervous titter arose somewhere in the audience, then a spreading giggle, nervous but with an undertone of malicious amusement.

An incredulous stare appeared on Admiral Baranovsky's face, followed at once by a furious scowl. The thick, bemedalled chest swelled; the thick hands clenched.

Herr K. also recognized the song and felt suddenly very sick. His eyes, against his will, swivelled to where Wilhelm Meisner stood.

The Chief of the Security Police sent him one icy glance that was as final as the dropping of a headsman's axe. He moved a hand, and four husky men closed in around Klaus Kleinmikkel. Another marched swiftly upon Oskar.

While the audience sat petrified, Admiral Baranovsky rose, turned on his heel, and swept out, stopping only to leave strict orders that no harm was to come to Oskar.

His raging exit was followed by an almost tearful Minister and by the Party leaders who looked as if they were going to their own executions.

Oskar was bewildered and annoyed when the big man dragged him rudely away from the instrument, crushing his shirt-bosom, and quite ruining his Big Number. The frozen, silent audience also puzzled him.

Why, back in the great grey city that smelt of the open sea and cooking fish, the people had always loved that piece, stamping their feet and joining in as he played, their voices bawling out the words: *Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves;*
Britons never never . . .

★ ★ ★

THIRTY DAYS HATH SEPTEMBER

We present our readers with a calendar for the New Year —unfortunately a little disarranged! We invite you to bring order out of confusion and put our almanac in sequence. Allow one point for identifying the month in each case, one for the source, and one for the poet, making thirty-six in all. Palm of honour for twenty-four or more!
The answers are on page 115.

1. *Thou comest attended with thousands and ten thousands of Little Loves.*

2. *Quoth the Raven, " Nevermore."*

3. *Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.*

4. *The English winter—ending in ——,*

5. *—To recommence in ——.*

6. *" Burglars! " she shouted. " Burglars in the house! "*
Herman and I hadn't dared to tell her that it was not burglars but ghosts.

7. *Ah, bitter chill it was!*
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold.

8. *In the porch stood several clean altar boys who conducted the lucky pair up the aile while the organ pealed a merry blast.*

9. *. . . I have pyped erst so long with payne,*
That all mine Oten reedes bene rent and wore.

10. *Up from the meadows rich with corn,*
Clear in the cool —— morn,
The clustered spires of Frederick stand
Green-walled by the hills of Maryland.

11. *Now the bright morning Star, Dayes harbinger,*
Comes dancing from the East.

12. *Like an army defeated*
The snow hath retreated.

BLACK MAGIC

It was such a surprising, strange idea—wasn't he making a mistake

by JOHAN FABRICIUS

MR. VAN HOUTEN, after working for ten years in the Department of Finance at Batavia, still remained an out-and-out "pukka sahib." He preferred roast beef and two veg. to such a barbaric dish as the Javanese *reis tafel*, and was definitely not the decadent type of European who, after enjoying his evening bath, lolled lazily back in a cane chair in the garden, dressed in a native jacket and pyjama trousers for added comfort, with a glass of Hollands gin and a cigar at his elbow.

Mr. Van Houten even wore a jacket and waistcoat over his shantung shirt on his daily journey to the office, with a haughty disregard for the tropical heat. And in the evening he would go with his wife paying calls, or receive visitors, or sit down at his writing-desk to look through some papers he had brought home with him from his office.

For some months past he had been living by himself in his spacious house in Kebon Sirih, for Thérèse had left for Holland in the spring, taking the children to her sister in The Hague, where they were to go to school. Tina would be twelve in August, and Robbie was turned fourteen—it was high time they were removed from the influences to which teen-agers were unavoidably exposed in this country where a mixture of races lived side by side.

The decision had not been an easy one for either Mr. Van Houten or his wife; but he had made up his mind and cut the Gordian knot. He had succeeded in persuading Thérèse to stay in Europe for the winter too, to recover a bit, in the healthy cold of Holland, from the climate of the East Indies, which she had never been able to stand very well.

The months of solitude weighed more heavily on him than he had thought they would. He had intended to take advantage of his wife's absence to dispose of a lot of work he had purposely put on one side to await this opportunity. But now he found that he often felt too restless to go and sit down at his desk again of an evening—the house was so empty and still, and every sound that broke the stillness distracted his attention. The

result was that ultimately he would close his file full of calculations with a sigh, or even sharply, with a movement of impatience, and rise from his chair, although, when he had done so, he still had no idea what to do with his time.

At first he had received many invitations out to dinner, but these had gradually become less frequent. His numerous acquaintances—what a lot of them there were!—were really acquaintances of his wife's, and it was only for Thérèse's sake that they paid him any attention. Her lively, cheerful conversation was the sole reason for their bothering about the Van Houtens at all; *he* was merely an " extra " thrown in.

Oh, he was perfectly well aware that he was looked upon as dull company; the trouble was, it was so difficult for him to take his mind off his work, even when the doors of the office had closed behind him for the day. His life in the department absorbed him heart and soul, but he could hardly expect anyone else to take an interest in it. When Thérèse was with him it didn't matter if he didn't say a word the whole evening, but without her he became acutely aware of his hopeless lack of conversational ability.

In order not to look too unsociable—and thereby earn a rebuke from Thérèse in Holland as well—he sometimes showed himself at the club on musical evenings. There, some associates or friends almost always beckoned him to their table, with a " Hullo, grass widower! Come over here and tell us where you've been getting to these days—full confession, mind! "

Perhaps he was excessively sensitive on the point, but there was something that jarred on him in that teasing " grass widower," and in such a question, shot at him with a laugh across a room full of people. To his ears it sounded rather inquisitive—almost offensively so, as if the speaker was indecently curious to know what it was like for an old married man such as himself to be suddenly condemned to bachelorhood and single strictness again.

And lately he had noticed, once or twice, the eyes of a woman scrutinizing him with a strange, almost ironical expression, in such a way that he became downright embarrassed and left the company as soon as he could, with the excuse that he had letters at home which had to be answered in time for tomorrow's mail.

The servants' quarters in Mr. Van Houten's house adjoined the back verandah. First came the store-room, kitchen, and bathroom, and then came the rooms occupied by Simin, the houseboy, who was married to Minah, the children's nurse and housemaid; Osman, the old gardener, husband of the Cook; and

Ketip, the coachman. As far as these last were concerned, the order might be the other way about—Mr. Van Houten really didn't exactly know, for he seldom went farther than the bathroom, except, for instance, when young Ketip came to ask him to have a look at Piet (the little black stallion that took him to the office every morning), or at the roof of the coach-house, which had a tendency to start leaking towards the end of every wet monsoon.

And on such rare occasions he took good care not to glance into any of those dark, windowless dens, from which the sounds of children crying sometimes penetrated to the outer world, together with a rather unpleasant odour of coconut oil and all kinds of native herbs and simples. There, in the back compound, was a little, self-contained world, from the frontiers of which Thérèse, at his express wish, had kept the children as far away as possible and in which he himself, as we have said, had never taken any interest.

Mr. Van Houten's lack of interest in the servants' lives was, however, by no means reciprocated by the servants. They considered they were lucky in their *tuan*, who made no unreasonable demands on them, knew nothing about the price of goods in the market, and never stuck his nose into things which didn't concern him.

And of an evening, as they squatted sociably together beside the well in the back compound, in the shade of the great banyan tree, they totted up the number of months the *nyonya* (mem-sahib) had been away already, and asked themselves, with concern, how long the *tuan* still had to remain alone. With the Javanese houseboy's typical fine feeling for these matters, Simin had already perceived that the *tuan* had ceased to find peace at home—you had only to look at him to see that he wasn't his normal self. Old Osman agreed with Simin—nowadays the *tuan* never came to look at the garden to see whether there were any weeds among the flowers, as he used to do when the *nyonya* was about. And Cook, Osman's wife, complained that she no longer got any credit for her skill from her *tuan*, although she gave him everything out of tins, just as he had always liked it.

It wasn't difficult to realize what the *tuan* missed. Night after night, the servants sat by the well, debating a possible remedy. Until at last Simin's wife, Minah, suggested one . . .

One afternoon, some days later, Mr. Van Houten had come home from his office and was on his way to the bathroom as usual, in pyjamas and slippers, with a towel over his shoulder, when he saw a young native woman, whom he did not remember having seen before, sitting on the edge of the verandah, opposite the kitchen door.

She sat on the topmost step leading down into the garden, looking out over the flowers and vegetables as if in reverie, but as he passed behind her along the open gallery, she turned half round towards him, and greeted him shyly: "Good evening, *tuan*."

He nodded, rather awkwardly and not over-enthusiastically. As he went on to the bathroom, he asked himself whether she might, by any chance, be one of Cook's numerous relations, about whom Thérèse had complained.

Nobody blamed the dear old soul for her extensive family; but she was in the habit of inviting those many nephews and nieces, those grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who were—very rightly—her pride and joy, to come and have dinner with her on the slightest pretext, and Thérèse suspected her of giving each of them something from the store-room as a parting gift. Cook had a tendency to be generous at the expense of her mistress, Thérèse declared; and finally she had taken action to put a stop to the many visits.

Did Cook think the coast was clear again, and that she could safely send invitations out once more? Mr. Van Houten decided that, although he could hardly go and count all the tins in the larder, or weigh and issue personally every pound of rice, he would nevertheless keep an eye on the Chinese grocer's bills.

When he left the bathroom, the short tropical dusk had already merged into night. The unknown young woman was still sitting in the same place, looking dreamily in front of her over the garden, which was dark by now. What on earth was she doing alone outside the kitchen, now shut up and deserted? If Cook had invited her, why hadn't she told her to come round to the back compound along with the other servants?

Now he thought of it, it struck him as being unusually quiet at the back there this evening . . . very likely they had all gone out because the master wasn't dining in the house anyway—he had been invited out for dinner, for the first time in some weeks. In that case, the strange girl must have found no one at home when she arrived, and was, perhaps, sitting waiting for Cook to come back.

He decided to ask her. But when, at his approach, she again turned her youthful, not unattractive, small face slowly and timidly towards him, he changed his mind. Possibly she was the latest sweetheart of Ketip, his coachman (who was still single), he thought suddenly; and he didn't want to appear inquisitive. By the way, it was high time that young gentleman came home, if he was to harness the horse for his master!

He was late himself this evening, Mr. Van Houten noted with

something of a shock, glancing at the clock in the back verandah. He dressed hurriedly, cursing Ketip in advance. But, thank heaven, he heard the crunching of gravel under wheels in front of the house, and recognized the impatient snorting of his fiery little stallion.

" *Belom jadi* . . . it hasn't come off yet," said Minah's niece, who had been summoned from the kampong, to her aunt. And Minah gave her verdict on it: " *Misti kasi lebih keras* . . . you must give him a stronger dose." This last injunction for the benefit of Cook, who, three evenings running, had put in her master's soup a few drops of a love-potion which the local dukun, the medicine-man, had extolled as infallible.

The dukun had assured them that the aphrodisiac would begin to work as early as the second day—but they hadn't seen any signs of it yet! And now they were losing a whole day, because the *tuan* had gone out to dinner this evening. Would it be worth risking a drop or two in his coffee tomorrow morning? Suppose he tasted something strange about it?

Simin suggested a solution to the problem: he would try it out on himself first. Cook set to and heated some coffee; Minah poured a generous dash of the magic elixir into it; and Simin cautiously took a few sips, shutting his eyes so as to be able to taste better. Everyone looked at him in tense expectation.

" I can't taste anything out of the ordinary in that coffee," said Simin at last. " But I think it's already making me a bit wild! " And in fun he made as if to embrace his wife's niece, who dodged out of his way, screeching with merriment.

" Here, you try it, too," said Simin, turning to Osman, and could not restrain his laughter when the old gardener accepted the cup from him in silence. " Look out, you're going to have trouble with him presently! " he warned Cook, who enjoyed the joke too. Grinning, she wiped the red betel juice from her toothless mouth with the back of her hand.

But her husband remained as serious as ever. " The coffee doesn't taste any different from ordinary coffee," he concurred. " I think we can take a chance on it tomorrow morning."

" But *I* haven't had a drop! " complained Ngadi, Minah's niece, looking into the empty cup. " Is there any more coffee in the kitchen? "

" No, that's enough for now," her aunt decided, resolutely putting the little bottle of love-potion away in a cupboard. " If we're not careful it'll all be gone before it's worked on the *tuan*! And it's not cheap—the dukun charged me all of fifty cents for it! "

"Ow! Mahal . . . how *dear*!" giggled Ngadi, opening her eyes with astonishment.

At that moment Mr. Van Houten, suspecting nothing of the trap which had been laid for him, was sitting at dinner with the Janssens, friends of Thérèse's, and had just told them, with great success—really, he was unusually lively this evening, for him—the story of the Javanese girl he had passed on his way to the bathroom, sitting lonesome outside the kitchen, waiting patiently till nightfall for Ketip, that incorrigible Don Juan.

The following night, she was sitting there again. He had not given her another thought, and for that reason it came to him as something of a shock to see her once more—this time, not outside the kitchen door (where Cook was very busy preparing his evening meal), but farther on, just opposite the bathroom.

This, in itself, embarrassed him a little; and now he *really* wanted to know what she was doing around his house. In his white man's Malay he asked her her business, in a somewhat stern tone.

She rose silently to her feet, as supple as a young animal, and said, her eyes shyly fixed on the ground but with an enigmatic smile on her lips, that she was a niece of Minah the nurse and Simin the houseboy, who had invited her to stay with them for a few days. She hoped the *tuan* would not be angry at finding her there.

Her gentle submissiveness had already allayed his irritation completely. "No, of course not; I only wanted to know . . . I didn't understand, yesterday, why you were sitting all on your own outside the kitchen, when nobody was there . . ."

He stopped short, suddenly feeling rather confused by this, for him, unusually familiar conversation with a native woman he did not know; though, surprisingly enough, it seemed as if they knew each other just the same, after yesterday. Nor did he understand why he had lowered his voice—weren't other people supposed to hear him, then?

"Were you waiting for your aunt?" he asked, awkward as ever, but louder than before.

She said nothing, as if completely at a loss to answer that question. Her only response was to raise her great, dark, moistly luminous Javanese eyes and look helplessly at him. Then she ventured to smile at him again—evidently the only way out of her embarrassment which she could think of.

Somewhat abruptly, he turned away from her, and entered the bathroom without more ado, belatedly regretting that he had ever allowed himself to be lured into this fruitless conversation. Was it *never* possible to find out what really went on in

the soul of a Javanese? Never a direct answer to a simple, direct question . . . He shut the door behind him, silently hoping that the woman would have disappeared by the time he left the bathroom again.

He stood by the side of the large brick bath and dipped into the cool water the small, saucepan-like utensil used in the East Indies for pouring water over oneself. Just as he was about to empty it over his head and shoulders, an idea came to him with the force of conviction, and he stopped halfway. It was, after all, such a surprising and strange idea—or rather suspicion . . . Wasn't he making a mistake? Could it really be that that woman . . . had been sitting waiting for *him* . . with certain intentions?

In the club, as the evening wore on and the gentlemen were left alone together, he had often heard laughing references made to A or B, "who preferred the Koran to the Bible at night behind the mosquito-netting."

Grey-haired Civil Service officials told stories, unembarrassed, with obvious pleasure even, of their time as young controleurs on tour of inspection up country, when they had sometimes found a young village beauty waiting for them in their bed at the end of the day—a kind attention on the part of the village headman, who still subscribed to old oriental conceptions of hospitality. Planters on holiday from the hinterland recollected striking examples of the seductive arts of native women who would not scruple to make use of goona-goona, black magic, if they wanted to gain power over you.

Mr. Van Houten had always hated to have to listen to such tales. The mere idea was an abomination in his eyes: how could a white man forget himself so far as to . . .! He would waste no time in asking Simin for a clear explanation of the presence of this woman. And if Simin couldn't give it, he would ask him to tell her to clear out.

Of course, he could tell her himself, if she still happened to be sitting there when he went out presently. But, on second thoughts, it seemed better to him not to say another word to her, and to leave the matter to his houseboy.

She sat there still. And—as if she felt she had done something to incur his displeasure in the meanwhile, and that it would not be wise to turn round to him at the moment—this time she remained immobile, looking straight in front of her. He could have sworn she had not heard him come out.

In passing the girl, he threw a cold, almost hostile glance at her motionless back. As he did so, for a brief instant he could not help seeing her through the eyes of . . . the others. A coil

of luxuriant hair hung heavily down over her neck; against its deep, velvety blackness gleamed a silver pin—or was it a little white flower?

Full, bare shoulders, which shone with a soft sheen in the electric light of the verandah, stood out in a rounded, flowing line against the tropical night. True—he could now form some idea of the kind of desires such feminine contours could arouse in a so-called " white man," none too fastidious anyway, who asked for nothing else but . . .

Yesterday at Janssens' Mr. Van Houten had more or less let himself be talked into coming the following night to the club, where the *beau monde* of Batavia would be gathered together for the weekly concert. He did not care for music, but so long as it was being played he was, at any rate, relieved of the necessity of talking, and Thérèse would be pleased to read in his next letter that he had once more listened patiently for a couple of hours to potpourris of Bizet and Puccini, out of consideration for his fellow citizens and loyalty to her, for she never missed one of those Friday evenings.

Fortunately, the affair didn't begin until nine o'clock, nor did it matter if you arrived a bit late—after all, it wasn't a lecture or a play. So he could take his time over shaving and dressing, and then read the newspaper at leisure while he ate.

How was it that, as he stropped his razor and carefully tested its sharpness with his thumb, he could not help suddenly thinking about that woman again, as she had sat there with her shapely shoulders turned to him, gazing out into the dark garden, musing, unmoving? For one strange moment he fancied he even breathed the perfume which had seemed to flow from her—the cheap, almost stupefyingly sweet perfume of a native woman, to which his European senses, not keyed to react to such strong stimulants, had, he thought, never been susceptible. What was the matter with him?

He opened his eyes; laid aside the razor—certainly sharp enough by now; and rubbed his shaving-brush in the pot of soap with a pronounced show of energy.

But a few seconds later the hallucination returned. He only became aware of it when he realized that he had gone on mechanically lathering his face for much longer than was necessary. After that he began to shave in a flurry, as if he was pressed for time after all.

" *Tuan . . . makanan fiap* r-r-ready! " Simin called from the back verandah.

He had himself told Simin to dish up the meal as soon as it

was cooked; and the fact that this " r-r-ready! " from his houseboy startled him so much that he cut his chin showed very clearly how deep in thought he had been once more. Stanching the blood with a towel, he muttered a curse.

The evening paper lay on the table, neatly folded beside his plate. He opened it and tried to interest himself in the news.

" There's too much pepper in the soup again, tell Cook! " he barked at Simin, with a violence in which he himself heard the note of exaggeration, of unbalance. In view of the state of inner confusion and turmoil he seemed to be in this evening, he thought it best not to carry out his original intention to talk to Simin about the latter's guest, at the back there, in the garden. His voice might give him away . . .

In the meantime Simin had rushed zealously to the kitchen, to report the *tuan's* criticism of the soup to Cook. Loudly and demonstratively, so that his master could hear it properly, he told her off: " *Tuan marah* . . . the master's angry! The soup was too hot again! "

Cook grumbled something in reply that Mr. Van Houten could *not* hear. Nor could he see the scared expression on her old face—or the impudent laugh on Simin's.

When, a few moments later, Simin brought in the roast beef, boiled potatoes, and green peas, the Javanese mask of that perfect houseboy's face was as composed and sedate as ever. Not a trace was to be seen on it of the rascally grin he had just shown in the kitchen.

With the utmost attention and devotion he bent with the dishes over his master, who sat at the head of the table in solitary splendour, tall and imposing, with a white tuft of cotton-wool stuck on his scarlet chin.

" Is *tuan* going out presently? " Simin asked, bringing in the vanilla blancmange which had been the sweet every evening as long as he could remember, and emptying the jug of strawberry syrup over it with an elegant movement of the hand.

Mr. Van Houten nodded absently, his nose buried in his paper. However, the meaning of the question seemed slow in penetrating to him; it was some time before he looked up and answered the houseboy with the counter-question: " Why? What's the matter? "

Simin assumed his most engaging expression. " Oh, nothing, *tuan*. But . . . there's a fair on in the Koningsplein."

" You can all go out if you like; I don't need anyone any more tonight."

" *Terima kaseh, tuan!* " Simin thanked him, overjoyed.

At that moment Ngadi sauntered past outside in the garden

—she had evidently decided to go round to the front compound and see whether there was anything doing yet in the streets.

Mr. Van Houten devoted all his attention to the newspaper.

Simin cast an indifferent look at the lissom shape out there in the dusk, over which the mellow glow of the lamp glided for a moment, and added, as an afterthought, to his word of thanks: "I'll tell them you've given us the evening off, sir. All . . . except Ketip, of course." Noticing that his master did not react in the slightest to these last words, Simin got the impression that he might not have heard them either. And so, to be on the safe side, he said again, rather more loudly: "Except Ketip, of course."

Mr. Van Houten gathered together with an effort his widely wandering thoughts. "Ketip?"

"You need the carriage this evening, don't you, *tuan*?"

"Oh! Yes."

It sounded rather silly, thought Simin; but he had already noticed that the *tuan* wasn't himself. For instance, he had left on his plate quite half of his green peas, which he usually ate with so much pleasure, and at present it did not seem to occur to him even to touch his blancmange.

"*Sudah jadi* . . . *now* it's working!" Simin reported, with a grin, to Osman and Minah, who were sitting expectantly beside the well, already dressed for going out. "He says we can all go to the fair! Only Ketip's got to stay at home, he says. But you'll see: he'll send *him* away, too!"

"Allah!" sighed Minah, the nurse. The excitement was almost too much for her.

Mr. Van Houten, alone on the back verandah, put down the newspaper and stared in front of him into space. Why had Simin so pointedly asked for the evening off—for himself, and for the others as well? If they had simply gone out later without telling him, he would never have noticed it anyway, would he? And that was what they had done on other occasions; so why did Simin have to ask him this time?

Was it to draw his attention to the fact that soon he would only need to send Ketip to the fair in order to be . . . quite alone in the house?

Alone with that woman, who—he knew—was now squatting in the front compound, just as she had sat near the kitchen door, and yesterday near the bathroom—only waiting till he should call to her.

He tried to imagine how . . . you did that sort of thing. What you said in such a case to such a woman, and how she would react . . . whether, perhaps, without a word, she would go

obediently through the front verandah and the sitting-room to his bedroom, head bowed and eyes cast down in a caricature of modesty.

What thoughts were these he was playing with already, he asked himself in sudden panic, catching his breath. It would be a leap into the abyss—a mad, reckless surrender to a moment of sensual desire, or perhaps merely to a morbid, ignoble curiosity about the unknown. For this indecision alone he would be ashamed of himself to the end of his days, even if nobody else ever knew anything about it.

He had himself under control again. Gritting his teeth, he got up and went to his bedroom to dress. Simin came in to clear the table, and took the untouched sweet back to the kitchen.

As Mr. Van Houten stood in front of the mirror buttoning up his snow-white shirt, the picture rose before him for the hundredth time. The picture of that native girl out there in the garden. Her bare, brown shoulders, gleaming golden in the lamplight, and the black, voluptuous fall of her coiled hair, with the ornamental silver pin in it—which, again, might have been a little white flower. The soft, flowing line of her arms; the litheness with which she had risen to her feet when he spoke to her; her slender young body, tightly sheathed in the sarong. Her liquid gazelle's eyes, and that slight, enigmatic smile, the real significance of which had only lately become clear to him. Her perfume . . . the cloyingly sweet oriental odour which, offensive as it might have been at first to his aesthetic instinct, proved to have obscurely titillated his senses so that he could no longer forget it.

He held his breath in order to listen as his servants went past the window, talking together in low tones. He recognized Cook's high-pitched gabble, Nurse's subdued giggling, and Osman's rumbling interjections. Simin said something about the fair, and that the *tuan* hadn't said a word about what time they were to be home again.

Gone. They were gone. Ketip, who was carrying on with the neighbours' young nursemaid, was generally out of earshot anyway.

Mr. Van Houten never knew what came over him at that moment. For twenty long years he had been a stranger in this vast tropical land, in which he had haughtily led his white man's life as if no one existed there save him and his.

Now, for one long moment, he seemed to be absorbed into that land, to sink, to dissolve into it, powerless to help himself. Perfumes streamed languorously about him; sounds in the night acquired deep significance.

This revelation, in its overwhelming unexpectedness, lifted the jadedness of his fifty years from his shoulders. He could not remember ever having been so young; prudence itself as a rule, he became, at one stroke, enterprising, audacious; the blood throbbed in his temples. His imagination was fired . . . for, after all, it could be nowhere else but in imagination that he heard a native orchestra play, and saw the young woman, who was actually still waiting for him in the front compound, weave seductive dancing movements, her great dark eyes on his, her smiling, luring, soft mouth so close to him that he . . .

The booming and twanging of the mysterious instruments must have merged some time before into the tinkle of the telephone—it was with a shock that he became aware of it. At first he could not bring himself to answer it. But the telephone went on importunately ringing.

Finally, he wrenched the damned thing off the hook.

" Yes—who's there? "

" Oh, have I got you at last? I was just going to ring off. This is Janssens here. Herbert Janssens. I've only phoned to say *we're* going to the club now. You'll be coming, of course? "

Mr. Van Houten hesitated.

" Well? "

" To be honest, I don't . . ."

" What? Of all the . . .! And yesterday you promised you would! "

" I didn't know then that I'd have work to do—"

" Oh, come off it—work! Work's a thing you can do any time. You work a damn sight too much—oddly enough, that's just what we were saying to each other a few minutes ago. You ought to get out more. It was only yesterday we realized what pleasant company you can be when you like! "

Of course, the mail's brought them another admonition from Thérèse, more or less asking them whether they're taking enough interest in me, thought Mr. Van Houten, suspiciously. He didn't fancy the club at all. Not this evening.

" All right, then, I'll see," he said evasively.

Unfortunately, Herbert wouldn't take that for an answer. " Oh no, my lad—none of your ' I'll see.' You're coming—that's that. We'll keep a chair free for you at our table, and if you're not there by half past nine, we'll send a search-party for you. Understand? "

And before the object of this peremptory invitation had time to say anything in reply, the receiver was hung up.

Mr. Van Houten cursed under his breath, furious at this arrogant encroachment on his liberty. " If I go to the club it'll be

because *I* choose to go, and not because you order me to!"

He went back to his bedroom, even more agitated than before. "What are they thinking of? What do they think they are? 'If you're not there by half past nine, we'll send a search-party for you . . . !' Damnation! I'll soon see about that!"

Nervously, feverishly, he pondered what to do. The lights out straight away. The front verandah in darkness. And then he'd just like to see who'd dare to try, if he didn't want . . .!

From the dressing-table, his wife looked out of a silver frame at him, with the slightly superior smile which the photographer had coaxed from her. It was as if Mr. Van Houten saw the photograph for the first time since she had put it there, with her own hands, in naïve self-admiration; with a start, he stopped short in front of it.

"What's the matter, Thérèse? Do you see anything odd about me? Why do you look at me like that, then?" His irritation at the tyranny her friends exercised over him now turned against his wife herself—he suddenly realized that she had bossed and directed him all her life, with tactfully silent criticism of his social and human imperfections.

A burst of ungovernable rage flared up in him. He hammered his chest with his fist.

"It's me—your husband! Take a good look, if you don't believe it! You've never seen me like this, have you? But do you know me, anyway? Do you *know* me?"

Startled by his own loud voice, he cast a hasty look behind him, putting the photograph face downwards on the dressing-table, as if Thérèse had caught him red-handed.

"Do I know myself?" he muttered.

He went outside, to take a deep breath of the evening air. Gradually the evil enchantment ebbed . . . the spell . . . it could have been nothing else.

Recollecting that the Janssens were waiting for him at the club, he went back into the room.

Resuming the interrupted wrestling-match with his mother-of-pearl shirt-studs, he looked, appalled, at the pallid face, covered with beads of sweat, which gazed back at him from the mirror with strangely haggard eyes. "Is that *you* . . . Mr. Van Houten?" the other seemed to ask, with lips that moved soundlessly.

Of a sudden, he could no longer bear to look at it, and turned abruptly away from the accusing image.

He fixed his black bow-tie with fingers that still trembled. But now he knew what he had to do.

Once dressed to his satisfaction, he felt for a rix-dollar in the

pocket of his silk waistcoat. Holding the coin between finger and thumb, he went to the front verandah and peered searchingly out over the starlit compound.

It seemed entirely deserted. Until something moved, and from the shadow of the ornamental palms in their tubs along the side wall the shape of a young woman emerged. She first bent down to smooth out the creases in her sarong, which had become rather rumpled, since she had been squatting there for a long time.

Then, slowly, she approached him.

He waited until she stood before him, eyes timidly cast down. Then he asked: " What's your name? "

" Ngadi, *tuan*," she whispered, and her lips folded into a smile which was an unspoken promise, and likewise a triumphant verification of Mr. Van Houten's lost struggle with himself.

" Here, Ngadi," he said, handing her the silver coin. " Here's something to buy a present for yourself at the fair. I'm sure you'd be glad to go too, just like your uncle and aunt? "

She stared at him, too staggered at first to be able to say anything.

While she let his words sink in, she put the money mechanically away in her bosom, after first fishing up from it a little purse, with slow, leisurely movements.

" *Terima kaseh*, *tuan*," she thanked him and smiled again, but this time slyly, almost scornfully; she seemed to have a sense of humour.

And without haste, masking her humiliation behind a show of indifference, she strolled out of the compound, rolling her hips seductively.

In spite of himself, Mr. Van Houten's eyes remained fixed on that youthful, feminine form.

Until it vanished in the darkness. Then he clapped his hands loudly, and called in the direction of the back compound, where the servants' quarters were: " Ketip! Where have you got to? What's happened to the carriage? "

A moment of silence followed.

Then, out of the night, came a hesitating, almost incredulous echo: " The . . . carriage, sir? "

" Yes, and look sharp about it. I'm standing here waiting! "

The voice of Ketip, fully alert again, suddenly sounded zealous and respectful. " Coming, *tuan*! "

★ ***Johan Fabricius's new story, " Black Magic," appears in " Girdle of Emerald," a collection of his stories to be published shortly by Heinemann.***

NORTH OF MIDNIGHT

by TOM HOPKINSON

THE moment the war ended, everybody had only one idea—to get themselves somewhere else. Those who were abroad wanted to come back home. Many who'd been kept at home were just as eager to be abroad. After six years building airfields up and down Britain, John Garrod jumped at the first chance that came his way. It was an unusual chance, and its consequences were odder still.

Not many people remember it today, but around September 1944, the Finns—who'd been fighting side by side with the Germans against the Russians—made peace with the Russians and invited the Germans to go quietly. The Germans played hell, particularly in the far north, up in the province of Lapland.

Farms, houses, churches, schools—everything was destroyed. However, the last German had not yet been driven out before the people were beginning to filter back, to salvage what they could, and to clear the land for ploughing. Rebuilding could wait.

Garrod's firm, constructional engineers in a big way, secured a contract to replace three steel bridges in and around the capital of the province, Rovaniemi, and Garrod, after a tussle with some of his colleagues, got himself sent out to survey the site in greater detail.

John Garrod was a determined young man, and an ambitious one. Working almost without a break all through the war, he had made a name for himself in his own line and built up a considerable position inside his firm. Success had made him over-confident and pushful, but of this he was happily unaware. Having good control over his temper and an easy manner, he found it hard to realize that not everyone he met took to him as readily as he felt they should.

Garrod arrived in Rovaniemi early in November, and by the beginning of December the main part of his work was done. However, there remained one further possibility which he'd been asked "just to look into, if you get the chance;" and, having fought for the opportunity of coming out here, Garrod meant to make the most of it. He was determined, not only to carry out his instructions, but to accomplish more than anyone could reasonably expect.

Up in the north-east corner of Lapland, within a hundred miles of the Arctic Ocean and only about forty from the Russian border, a new road was projected. Estimates were likely to be asked for in the spring, and if Garrod could get a close look at the country in the meantime, his firm would be in a better position to secure another important contract to follow on after the first.

His immediate problem was to get there. In summer there's a good deal going on in the far north, but in winter the land lies under the hand of death. Getting across country is never easy, but at that time it was like a game of snakes-and-ladders.

By mid-December Garrod was about ready to pack it all in. But just then the Government in Helsinki happened to send up three tracked vehicles with a party of engineers, to take supplies through to Ivalo, a little town at the end of the Arctic highway, and the officer in charge made no difficulty about taking Garrod along. By now the rivers were frozen hard and the vehicles could run straight over.

When a place has its name in black letters on a map, it's hard not to expect something like a town to correspond. Not much perhaps, just a few streets, a church, an open square, and a store or two.

In Ivalo at that time there were three houses, bursting at the seams with all the people who packed into them each night for shelter. The rest were simply chimneys, row after row of blackened chimney-places. Being built of brick, they stuck up like gaunt memorials, after the wooden houses they once warmed had gone up in smoke all around them.

Faced with this forbidding scene, in which even daylight was

lacking for more than a few minutes of each day, Garrod remembered that he had a letter of introduction. Back in Helsinki, when arranging with the Government about his trip, someone in the department dealing with Lapland had written it out and handed it across.

" If ever you *do* get to Ivalo, go and see Aimo. If anyone can help you, he can. I don't say he will, mind you. I just say he can."

The officer in charge of the party made inquiries about Aimo. He was a mysterious figure, his Finnish origin doubtful. Even his age appeared uncertain. He was believed to have come originally from Russia, perhaps back in 1917. Neither wars nor invasions shifted him.

" When the Germans arrived," Garrod was told, " Aimo became a bear and made his home underneath a tree." He spoke " all languages," and was one of the few people who could talk to the different tribes of Lapps in their own tongue.

Aimo lived some miles out. It was no good, they told Garrod, setting out to visit him tonight. In the morning somebody going that way would escort him. For tonight, the three men sleeping underneath the kitchen table would move a little closer.

Aimo's home proved to be a small bath-house built of logs. The Finns are a people of pioneers, continually bringing more and more of their wild land under cultivation. For centuries it has been the custom, when a family settles on unbroken land, to build first the bath-house where the family will one day take its *sauna*, or steambath, usually by a lakeside. The family lives for the first winter in the bath-house while the land is cleared. In spring, the soil is ploughed and the crops sown. After harvest, the farmhouse proper is put up before the second winter.

Aimo had built his own bath-house, and was sitting the winter out, half hibernating as so many do in the long northern night; and, just like the bears who hibernate under the roots of trees, Aimo was angry at being disturbed.

" I don't know what you've come to *me* for," he protested. " I'm not a Government pensioner. I'm only a poor damned farmer trying to get my little bit of land in order. I've quite enough on my hands without worrying over your concerns."

Garrod listened patiently, waiting for the storm to blow itself out. It didn't.

At last: " I can see I've been misinformed," he said. " I'd better be getting back to Ivalo."

" But how? " demanded Aimo angrily: he was a tall, fair man, with a face both powerful and empty. " How can you get back?

It's five miles to Ivalo through snow and darkness, with no proper road. You're just making me responsible for your death. No! You'll go back tomorrow when I can go along with you."

He thrust out a hand and pulled Garrod into the bath-house: it was a rough, but not ill-natured movement.

An hour or two later, after a meal, as they sat over a bottle of schnapps Garrod had brought with him, he resumed the attack, with the help of his letter of introduction.

"It's no go," Aimo answered shortly. "At this time of year, you can do nothing. Better pack up your woolly pants and clear off home. Come back in May, and I might have the time to help you."

"I can't come back in May," said Garrod. "I've got to get there now. It would be managed in five minutes if there was a war. Why can't it be done now when we've got blessed peace?"

"If there were a war," Aimo answered, "governments would conspire to send you there. As it is, you're on your own. So it's no go!"

"But your Government *did* conspire to send me here," Garrod protested. "And they told me to call on you if I needed help. What they actually said was that there's nothing round here you can't handle if you try. But the Minister added—" Garrod paused, as if to stop short of an indiscretion.

"Well?"

"That you were an inhospitable fellow, interested only in your own back yard."

Aimo's great fist made the glasses leap from the packing-case table. "Inhospitable! Me inhospitable! Interested in my own affairs, and not in my beloved country! That's what you get from these twopenny jacks-in-office. The Minister, though—he talked about me personally?"

"He certainly did," replied Garrod. Once started on a lie, it's best to shore it up with boulders. "He knew about you all right, and I've promised when I'm back to let him know how I got on."

Aimo paused. "Your problem's what—how to live for three or four days near the spot where the road ferry's to be built?"

Garrod nodded. "If I can get a look at the country generally, and then spend a day surveying where the ferry's going to be, I'm O.K. Someone'll have to come out later on, of course, but there'll be that much more to work on when he comes." He did not add that his own claims to coming out later on would also be that much stronger.

Aimo slowly refilled their glasses. "There's no one living round there, bar a few families of Lapps."

" I don't mind roughing it."

" You'll rough it, all right," said Aimo grimly. " That's the least of it. The question is whether they'll take you in at all."

" Good lord, I'll pay. And surely they want the ferry as much as anyone? "

" You certainly *won't* pay. If you even offer to, you'll be outside. As for the ferry, it'll only bring a lot of pie-faced tourists they don't want. No, your only chance is to land up there helpless, and hope they'll take you in out of kindness of heart."

Garrod took another chance: " It won't be me who'll turn up there helpless, it'll be *us*. If you want your ferry, you come too! Unless I can arrange transport to move about, ask questions on the nature of the country and so on, I might just as well not go. You'll have to come along as fixer and interpreter."

Anticipating Aimo's fierce refusal, he went on quickly: " Look here, if the Lapps don't use money, I dare say you do. Help me out on this, and you'll get something handsome now. Then, if the ferry ever gets built, you can come in to organize the labour."

After two hours' talk, the men shook hands on a bargain, made the fire up for the night, and went to sleep in front of it. Garrod, as financier and boss, had the side nearest the warmth.

Up there towards the Arctic Ocean, one never sees the sun at this time of the year. The most that happens is a pinkish glow in the south towards mid-day. If the sky's overcast, there may be no more than a pallid flicker for a week or more. The two men had to wait for a moon before setting out. They travelled on skis.

Garrod was no skier, but the country's never steep, and the snow was good. It was more a matter of endurance than of skill. They simply trudged along a snowy track between mile after mile of miniature forest—miniature because no tree gets sun enough to grow more than a third of its full height before it's old, and beginning to die off. Every now and then there'd be open stretches, which Garrod thought were fields, but Aimo said would be either bogs or lakes. An occasional fox barked, and twice they heard the howl of wolves.

Everything worked exactly as they'd planned. They made the trip before the moon went down, found the Lapps' hut by the shore of a snow-covered lake, not more than a mile off the main track. Garrod couldn't follow what Aimo told them, but obviously they recognized him, and it served.

There was no room in the hut, where the family slept together, but the strangers were given the little bath-house twenty yards

away. It was rotten and full of cracks, but the snow had drifted deep around the walls, so there'd be no draughts, and there was the stove in the corner which would keep them warm.

Next day, or what he took to be next day, after having some tea and bread and smoking a cigarette, Garrod got Aimo to raise the reason for his visit. They wanted, Aimo told the Lapp, whom he called something that sounded like Olmai, to travel about ten miles northward through the forest in order to inspect the place which seemed most likely for a ferry.

Olmai—a little man, dark-skinned, with a face wrinkled all over as though it had once been a big face and had shrunk—evidently recognized the spot. It would be possible to go there, he said, on reindeer sledges.

"Why not on skis?" asked Garrod.

The snow in the forest was too powdery for ski-ing, Olmai explained through Aimo. The stranger would be falling through all the time and catching his skis in tree stumps.

A little offended that he should be thought less capable than the others—and puzzled as to how Olmai could know it—Garrod reluctantly agreed to go on sledges, and Olmai went off to make arrangements.

Five minutes later he was back. "What does he say?" Garrod asked impatiently.

"He says it's no good," Aimo answered. "The reindeer won't start today."

"What the devil d'you mean? The *reindeer won't start*—tell him to make them start!"

"That isn't the way the Lapps treat their reindeer," Aimo explained, and Garrod sensed a certain quiet enjoyment in Aimo as he said it. "They never *make* them go on journeys as you do with cars and horses. They always talk to them beforehand and tell them where they want to go."

"And if the reindeer says, 'No, thanks, I'd rather not,' they call it off, I suppose?"

"Pretty well. But the reindeer doesn't talk, it sneezes. If his reindeer sneezes when Olmai tells it where he's going, you can be sure the journey's off. And Olmai's reindeer *did* sneeze."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" protested Garrod. "There won't be many more days when the moon's near full. What is it he's afraid of?"

"He says there's no proper track where you want to go. Unless the snow's just right, the reindeer can easily break a leg."

"Tell him if any harm comes to his reindeer, my firm will compensate him—double its value."

Aimo spoke, and Olmai answered. At his reply, the two men

broke into roars of laughter, much to Garrod's annoyance.

"Well, what does he say now?"

"Olmai says," replied Aimo, "that it's very kind of you, and your offer would be very nice for him. But it wouldn't be quite the same thing to the reindeer."

Garrod restrained his temper with an effort, which was all too visible. "I see there's nothing for it but to wait," he said. "I've had difficulties of this sort before with primitive peoples. They don't understand the value of money, that's their trouble."

"No," answered Aimo drily, "I suppose they don't."

The two men waited one day, two days. On the evening of the second day, which Garrod had spent largely in cursing over Olmai's obstinacy, the Lapp asked them over to his hut. As they passed in through the door, Garrod, annoyed over the delay and still more by the fact that no one except himself seemed the least bit worried by it, muttered to Aimo, "Good lord, what a pigsty!"

He didn't need Aimo's scowl to make him feel ashamed the minute he'd spoken, but comforted himself in the knowledge that the Lapp certainly couldn't have heard him and, if he had heard, couldn't possibly have understood.

Inside the hut, the whole family was assembled; an aged grandmother—a little old lady who looked like a large doll; Olmai himself, and his wife—a fair-haired girl who was half Russian; three or four children, and a couple of young men who were taking a herd of reindeer somewhere, and just happened to have looked in for a few days.

The meal was welcome. There were platefuls of little fish which Olmai had caught with a net through holes in the ice, followed by reindeer-meat stew. Afterwards the children and the old lady withdrew into a kind of lean-to by the side of the hut, where they appeared to settle down for the night with the sweets which Garrod had given them.

The young men put on thick coats and boots, shook hands all round, and set off—their visit, apparently, being over. Olmai went out to see them on their way, and his wife withdrew to the stove and started to make tea.

Aimo immediately turned to Garrod: "Please be careful what you say in front of Olmai and his old mother!"

Garrod flushed. He knew the rebuke to be deserved, but liked it none the better. "What d'you mean? They don't understand English, do they?"

"No—" Aimo hesitated—"they don't 'understand English,' as you put it. But they know what you're saying all the same."

" How can they possibly know? " Garrod objected. " That's absolute nonsense."

" You may call it nonsense," Aimo answered placidly, " but you're now in a part of the world where ' nonsense ' happens. Those two young Lapps who've just left will go straight to the part of the forest where their own reindeer are feeding. They won't search the landscape with radar sets, or cruise over the scenery with helicopters. They won't even crawl about on their hands and knees examining reindeer tracks to find the right ones. They'll simply go to the place where their reindeer are.

" Similarly, if Olmai wants to buy reindeer in the spring, he'll go to the particular part of the forest where he'll meet the man he's going to trade with. They won't send telegrams or ring each other up. Each of them will be thinking about the deal for several days, then at a certain moment they'll set off. And they'll *meet*. Not within five minutes as you might meet your girl in London, but within twenty-four hours, which is quite good enough for Olmai. He'll be away perhaps three days, and as he gets near home on his way back, Tania here will put on the cooking-pot."

" And on top of all that," said Garrod, " you mean to tell me he speaks English? "

" Not a word! " replied Aimo. " But he understands what you're saying when you talk inside his hut. And I should say it's almost certain he knew we were coming before we got here. There was a supply of wood in the bath-house, and the place had been cleaned out."

" Well, as far as believing in wizards is concerned, Lapp or otherwise—count me out! " said Garrod. " I'm sorry I was rude about Olmai's hut. It was decent of him to take us in, and I shouldn't have spoken like that—regardless of the fact that he can't possibly have understood."

Olmai had returned and was standing by the hut door. Suddenly he reached up to the roof and got down a broom. As he did so he grunted something to Aimo, who looked across at Garrod.

" What's he saying? " Garrod demanded.

" He says, ' I suppose it's the he-pig's job to sweep out his own sty,' " Aimo replied.

Next morning, or rather next moonlight, the reindeer had apparently agreed to travel.

The men set off in two sledges, each drawn by a reindeer, with Olmai following on skis. They reached the spot Garrod had in mind, and got to work.

For five or six hours all went well. Olmai toiled like a Trojan, breaking holes in the ice to test the depth of water, scratching snow away to find where the shore ended, and whether there was mud or gravel underneath. Once he helped Garrod up into a tree, so that he could get the lie of the land. And then suddenly he called out that they must go back.

Garrod's work was actually done, but he resented being ordered about, and had been looking forward to a drink and a cigarette before starting the journey home.

"What's the trouble?" he inquired

"It's the wolf."

"What wolf?"

"There's a wolf that's haunted this district," Aimo told him, "for ten years. He's killed dozens of their sheep and reindeer calves. They've seen him often, but they can never manage to shoot him. They say he lives in Russia, and slips back over the border where he knows they can't follow him."

"Why don't they poison the brute?"

"They've tried a hundred times. He never goes near any kill that's been touched by a human being. When they set traps for him, he scratches them up."

"Sounds like a mythical wolf to me."

"No doubt," Aimo replied. "But if you'd lost as many sheep as I have, you'd allow the myth a basis of fact. The Government evidently does. They've put a bounty of a million marks on this particular myth's head."

"But I thought wolves hunted in packs."

"Not always. Not even very often."

"Anyway, what's this wolf got to do with our going home? Olmai hasn't seen it, has he?"

Aimo paused. "Not exactly," he admitted. "But he says it's hanging about his hut, and he must go back and make sure everything is safe."

Garrod snorted, but said nothing. Olmai meantime had been harnessing the sledges. As soon as he gave the word, the party set off, following their own tracks through the forest and travelling at a good speed. Olmai was leading with his rifle at the ready, then came Garrod on his sledge, followed by Aimo.

They cracked along for the best part of an hour. Suddenly, only a mile or two from the hut, Olmai stopped dead, and the reindeer, trotting close behind him, splayed its feet out to stop too. Garrod's sledge, skidding over the ice with the weight of a powerful man inside, ran smack against its hind legs.

The sledges the Lapps use are made exactly like small rowing dinghies With age and cold, one of the timbers forming the

front of Garrod's sledge had cracked, and a long splinter ran deep into the reindeer's hock and then broke off, leaving a jagged wound. Olmai gazed at it in dismay.

He seemed incapable of action. He'd stopped in order to listen, or whatever he did to gauge the wolf's whereabouts. Now he was torn between wanting to rush back home, and wanting to attend to his reindeer. He simply hung there, pulled both ways. Aimo had stopped his own sledge and came up.

"Make him push off!" Garrod exclaimed. "He's the only one who can get home quickly. Tell him to go. We can fix up the reindeer, then follow his tracks."

Aimo nodded, spoke sharply to Olmai, who vanished through the trees, and the two men got to work. They unharnessed the reindeer and tied it to a branch. Then Aimo took a firm hold of its leg and Garrod, after some trouble and a broken nail, succeeded in drawing out the long splinter.

By this time he was so cold the only way he could get a purchase on it was with his teeth. This he did, expecting all the time to have his face laid open by the reindeer's free hoof. The wound bled nastily at first, but they soon stopped that by plastering the place with snow.

There were skis in both sledges in case of accident, and Garrod insisted on putting his on, and leading the injured reindeer home. Aimo coupled one sledge behind the other and followed.

Inside the hut there was chaos, and it took some time before Garrod could learn what had happened. Olmai had seen the wolf. He'd rounded up his half-dozen sheep, then dashed indoors. All the family were there, except the smallest child. A desperate hunt through the woods had taken place, before she was found playing with the men's belongings in the bath-house.

Once she was safe, Olmai had gone straight off on skis to hunt the wolf. Aimo, thinking perhaps of that million marks, caught up his rifle from the bath-house, and went too.

Olmai had evidently told his wife about the injured reindeer, for she was stirring some kind of a poultice on the stove. As soon as it was ready she went with Garrod to apply it. As they were leaving, having put the reindeer into a shed for the night, the beast nuzzled up to Garrod in the way horses do. He thought nothing of this, but Olmai's wife, when she noticed it, nearly dropped all she was carrying.

"*Hren, hren,*" she exclaimed as if something wonderful had happened. Garrod smiled, which was all he could do, and went into the hut to have some food.

Hours later, Olmai and Aimo came back together. They'd lost the wolf near the Russian border, but Olmai had shot a fox. It

wouldn't bring in a million marks, but it might be worth a thousand—enough to buy sugar, flour, and paraffin for his family for a few weeks.

Once Garrod's survey trip was over, there was nothing he wanted but to get back home. He'd have liked to set off next morning, but Aimo was anxious to have one more go at the wolf. He was a noted shot; the Lapps are excellent trackers; he might never get such a chance again.

After a good deal of argument, Garrod agreed to wait two days, which would take them to the 23rd of the month, and Aimo was to come back then, whether he'd shot the beast or not.

On the first day it never appeared. On the second, according to Aimo, they had the hunt of a lifetime. He was convinced he'd wounded the wolf. It had eaten most of a sheep when they got on its tracks, and was tiring fast as it approached the border. If only there'd been a few more miles, he'd have got it: he'd fully made up his mind to stay another day and try again.

Garrod said briefly that in that case he would set off without him: he could see that Aimo didn't believe he meant it and considered him a spoilsport for not accepting the delay.

Next night when the moon rose—the hunters had already been gone a couple of hours—Garrod began getting his things together. Having packed his knapsack, he went over to the hut to say good-bye to Olmai's family.

The wife, Tania, was disturbed. She told him quite plainly —in her own language, but the meaning was unmistakable— that he ought not to start; he must wait for Aimo. She also kept saying something very emphatic about the *hren*.

Garrod imagined she wanted him to see to the injury, so he went out with her to look at it. He felt tenderly all round the place; it was swollen, but quite healthy, and the leg itself was not inflamed. Clearly the reindeer was going to be all right. Once more it pushed close up to him, so he patted its muzzle and went out.

No sooner had he got back to the hut than Tania started on again about the *hren*, and suddenly Garrod perceived what she was trying to tell him: the reindeer didn't think it a good plan for him to set off.

For a moment Garrod had a good mind to give in. He knew he was taking a serious risk in going alone. It wasn't just the risk of losing his way, he felt quite capable of following the track which ran west-sou'-westward into Ivalo.

But if anything happened while on his own, if he should break a leg or an ankle, the chance of his getting anywhere before he

froze to death must be remote. At such a moment, an omen of any kind assumes importance—as any deep-sea fisherman well knows.

However, his natural annoyance at having his hand forced by Aimo was now backed by a reluctance, the reluctance of civilized man to believe in any form of knowledge that isn't listed on his own card-index. Garrod felt instinctively that to abandon this plan would be a contravention of his whole scheme of life, a denial of the authority of modern science, by one branch of which he made his living.

" I'm damned if I'll take advice from any reindeer," he told himself, put his pack on his back, shook hands formally with Tania and the grandmother, patted the children's heads, and started off.

He realized as he did so that it was Christmas Eve.

All Garrod had to do now, he told himself, was to steer through the forest for a mile or two, keeping the white blanket which was a lake upon his right, and at a certain point he'd be bound to cross the track leading to Ivalo—which is exactly what he did, only he crossed it without knowing that he'd done so.

At any rate, after travelling for half an hour, he realized he'd gone wrong, and turned; luckily he had his own ski-marks to follow.

This time, watching more carefully for an opening, he recognized the track but with a shock at how much narrower it seemed than he remembered it. They'd followed along so easily when coming that it had grown almost to a roadway in his mind.

It was far from that, a mere path between the trees, and he was relieved to find that the impression of their skis on the outward journey was still discernible underneath the powder—though a fresh fall of snow or an hour's strong wind would alter that.

Garrod shook himself, took a look at the stars to memorize his direction, and set out for Ivalo. Mile after mile the stunted spruce and birch trees lined the way, with no variation but the snow-covered flats.

Garrod felt like an insect travelling between rows of print on a white page; the book went on for ever, chapter after chapter, till at last he had really no idea whether he was coming or going. He simply trudged, slid when a gentle incline offered, and trudged again.

He'd been trudging for about three hours by his watch, when the moon started to become obscured. At first it was mere wisps of cloud; after they passed, she shone bright as before.

But before long he could see a solid cloud-bank being drawn slowly over the sky like a great shutter, and it gave him the feeling that comes over every man on winter evenings when the night closes down in storms—a sense of being frightened without knowing why, a longing to be inside a house with other people.

He pressed on faster, through another long hour of tightening cold and failing light, then came out at the head of a long incline, which gave him the chance to put another quarter of a mile behind him without effort. He gave a good shove off with his sticks, leaned forward into his knees, and went whizzing down.

Near the bottom, running slightly off the track, he hit an obstruction and was flung over in a somersault, to land spread-eagled in the snow.

As his legs whirled above his head Garrod felt a blow on one of his feet and heard a crack. When, after a moment or two, he sorted himself out, he found that one of his skis had snapped against a tree. The turned-up end and about twelve inches from the front were missing.

For a minute or two he rummaged about in the snow for the missing piece—not that it would have been the least use to him if he had found it—then struggled back to the track.

Such a thing had never happened in his small experience of ski-ing, and he didn't at first realize the extent of his disaster. He guessed it would be awkward to travel with a broken ski, but had no idea that for someone unskilful, in deep snow, it would be impossible.

Every few steps the front of the ski simply nose-dived into the drift and stopped him dead: after he'd wrenched his ankle twice, he took both skis off and began to try to walk, humping the skis on his shoulder.

The snow was an icy powder that engulfed each leg to well above the knee: it was like wading through a quicksand. After plunging about till his clothes were soaked and he was trembling with exhaustion, Garrod looked back. The spot where he'd left the track was still plainly visible. At this rate—which he couldn't hope to maintain—he reckoned it would take him about twenty hours to make Ivalo.

Laying the skis on a patch of harder snow, he sat down on them to consider. The moon had vanished. He could see only a short way ahead. The cold was hardening almost visibly. Garrod remembered stories of Napoleon's invasion, when the frost in Moscow was so fierce that crows dropped dead out of the trees, and were wheeled from the Imperial Gardens by the barrow-load. There were no crows here, but from far away came a thin howl.

To go back—or to go on? There was no safety either way, but either course might contain a thread of chance. Ivalo was probably nearer than the Lapps' hut, but clearly he would never, on his own strength, make either. What mattered, then, was the chance of help coming towards him. No one, obviously, would come out this way from Ivalo on Christmas Eve, but there was just a possibility that Aimo or Olmai might have set out after him.

Of the two courses, Garrod argued, it was slightly less hopeless to turn back.

He unbuckled the broken ski and threw it from him. Then he set off, half kneeling, on the one ski, hopping with his other foot alongside through the snow. It was a little easier than walking, and on the downhill, he hoped, he might manage to balance both feet on the one ski.

Travelling so, it took him about five minutes to get back to where he'd had the fall, and another half-hour to make the top of the incline that had led to his disaster. However, by the time he'd made it, Garrod was all in. The cold had got right inside his sopping clothes. It had got inside his body too. He could feel it clenched in his entrails like a fist. He imagined all the organs of his body freezing up, and dark icicles forming along every artery.

He took his one ski off, it took minutes merely to undo the catch. Then he planted it upright in the snow—it might serve as a mark to someone—staggered across the track, and slipped down beneath a tree.

Snow had begun to fall. He looked at the sky and at the earth, and saw that they'd joined together. There was no longer any difference between them, only one even, drifting whiteness, with a dark, motionless spot upon the edge, which was himself.

It seemed quite natural to him now that this dark spot should be eliminated—and the moment he thought that, he noticed that he wasn't cold at all. Snow doesn't experience itself as cold. The sky doesn't feel cold, and Garrod was now become part of snow and sky.

At this moment, the moment of absolute peace he'd been waiting for all his life, came sudden outcry, buffeting, confusion. Something fierce like fire was being scrubbed against his face. He was pulled this way and that, as if by animals. " I hope it's the wolf," he thought, " then it will soon be over."

" Keep moving," said a harsh voice in his ear. " Brace up! Shake yourself! You've *got* to move."

More fiery snow was rubbed against his tortured face, and something like liquid fire boiled down his throat.

It was two days later when Garrod opened his eyes in a bed at Ivalo. It was a bed with sheets, and though his face felt as if it had been lately peeled like an apple, he went to sleep again at once.

Next time he woke, Aimo was sitting there in the lamplight, and crouched in a corner of the room was Olmai. Aimo looked angry and apologetic. Olmai was smiling benignly like a Buddha.

Garrod lay for a few moments capturing his thoughts and struggling to get his lips apart. Then—"What made you come after me?" he gasped. "It was a straightforward trip. I ought to have made it easily."

"Olmai did," answered Aimo. "As soon as we got back to the hut, he said, 'Something's wrong. The reindeer are upset.' Then he spoke to Tania, and at once decided we must go after you. He harnessed two of the reindeer and we followed your tracks on sledges. After he'd stopped your nose falling off from frost-bite, we decided to bring you into Ivalo. The distance was much the same, but you could be looked after better here."

"So Olmai was Father Christmas," Garrod thought. He was too tired to say anything out loud. A picture of Olmai on his reindeer sledge simply formed before his mind, and faded. As it did so, he noticed Olmai smile, and the Lapp said something to Aimo softly.

"What's that?" Garrod roused himself to ask. "What's Olmai saying?"

"He says that if you can turn him into an old man with a white beard and a red coat, you're a bigger wizard than he is," Aimo told him. "I don't know what the hell the little chap's talking about. Better go to sleep now and shut up."

Which is exactly what Garrod did.

CHRISTMAS TREE

Let every man be jolly.
Each room with ivy-leaves is dress'd,
And every post with holly

We carried the tree into the house and dressed it up. Angels and fairies, candles, shiny glass balls, and long silver icicles were hung among its branches. Last of all I fixed our Star of Bethlehem enshrining the tiny Baby high above the rest.

KATHLEEN JARVIS, *A Nightingale in the Sycamore*

Rejoice and be Glad

The holly's up, the house is all bright,
The tree is ready, the candles alight:
Rejoice and be glad, all children tonight.

The mother sings of our Lord's good grace
Whereby the Child who saved our race
Was born and adored in a lowly place.

Once more the shepherds, as she sings,
Bend low, and angels touch their strings:
With " Glory " they hail the King of kings.

The children listening round the tree
Can hear the heavenly minstrelsy,
The manger's marvel they can see.

Let every house be ready tonight—
The children gathered, the candles alight—
That music to hear—to see that sight.

P. CORNELIUS, *translated by H. N. Bate*

Tree of Light

Out of that remote past comes our Christmas tree with its balls of gold and silver, its long streamers of tinsel, its flowers and fruits, blooming anew each year, making us glad with its fragrance and beauty. The lights that sparkle in its branches, once a signal to Freya, today remind us only of the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. In the topmost branch where Thor's eagle once flapped his dark wings, an angel shines—the angel of the Annunciation, the angel of the shepherds, the angel whose message is " Fear not." There in the heaven at

the top of the tree we hang the golden ball of the sun, the silver ball of the moon, and the myriad starry host. On the widespreading starry branches we place little figures of animals, all the friendly beasts that serve man; and the flowers and fruits that reward his labours and make his heart rejoice.

According to ancient custom there are four great reindeer on our tree, and as they feed on the branches the four seasons pass. Twelve lesser reindeer nibble away at the little green twigs, and as they eat the twelve months pass. The chattering squirrel who ran up and down the old World Tree, creating discord in the home of the gods and in the lair of the dragon, is in our tree, a reformed, delightful Christian squirrel. Certain other creatures find an honoured place because they belong especially to the Christmas story. The camels that brought the Magi to the newborn King; the ox and the ass; the shepherd boy's dog; the cock and the raven and the lamb; and the fish, first symbol of Christ's name. No Christmas tree is really complete without these . . .

GERALDINE GORDON, *The Christmas Tree*

Silver Tinsel

Little fir tree of the forest,
Standing proudly in the room,
Why are you so glad and happy?
Where is now your prickly gloom?
Is that silver on your fingers?
Are those presents round your feet?
Do you hear the children's voices
Singing carols, shrill and sweet?

EILUNED LEWIS, *The Fir Tree*

Christmas Crib

"Now," she said, and Lady Matlock turned the lights off again.

As the flame took strength and burgeoned on the wicks of ten tiny candles, the Nativity of Christ, as reconstructed by Neenie with farmyard toys and old bits of stuff, emerged there, where the light was concentrated and utterly still. All the heads of cattle, all eyes of models, all tinsel stars, and one bronze tiger ("why not, darling?") directed inflexible attention at a manger where lay a celluloid doll taken from the children's old toy cupboard.

Murmurs, little cries, compliments. "Neenie, it's too lovely."

HUGO CHARTERIS, *A Share of the World*

Shining Presents

Imagine how you would feel if someone took you to the biggest, shiningest and most expensive toyshop in the world, and said, " Buy whatever you like, and as many things as ever you like! "

Well, Fritz and Mary felt like that when they saw The Tree. It stood in a tub in the middle of a white sheet, and its pointing top almost touched the ceiling.

A hundred candles, pink, blue, yellow and white, were sparkling steadily on the branches, and instead of fruit, gold and silver balls, such as drop from rockets when they explode softly in the sky, grew among the dark green needles.

There were blossoms of sugar and fir cones of chocolate, too, and festoons of pearls, big enough for the neck of a giant princess, and great steel stars fit to pin on the breast of the bravest general. And all round the tree lay the presents.

Mary skipped and clapped her hands, and Fritz, after standing still for a second, flung himself on the sofa and buried his face in the cushions, kicking his heels in an ecstasy of delight.

Only when the first excitement of pleasure was over could they look at anything in particular. Mary found she had a doll, twice as big as Rose, whom she at once christened Mademoiselle Claire. Fritz discovered on a table a squadron of hussars, dressed in scarlet uniforms and mounted on white horses, while beside the table stood a rocking-horse as big as a St. Bernard Dog, saddled and bridled and ready to ride . . .

DESMOND MACCARTHY AND BRYAN GUINNESS,
The Story of a Nutcracker

Snow Magic

In berried halls
We have a tree
Whose coloured leaves
And golden balls
When children see,

Clapping their hands
They'll think the Sun
With Moon and Stars
Together stands
While the snow falls.

W. J. TURNER,
A Christmas Song

THE STAR IN THE EAST

The High King was aware of a strange new One, mightier than he

by ELIZABETH MYERS

ON this glittering starry night most of the known world belongs to the Romans. One of the exceptions is a wild island lying like a great green fern in the Atlantic Ocean. The Roman Eagle is not flying there because the conqueror of Britain never received the extra legion that would have enabled him to cross the sea and subdue Ireland.

And now on this first Christmas night—though as yet the word "Christmas" is unknown, both to the Romans and the unconquered Gael—the High King of Ireland sits at a feast, oppressed by feelings of fear and dismay.

He stares round the banqueting-hall, from the furs on the floor to the oak shingles of the roof inlaid with gold—all one tawny livingness up there with reflections from the fires, and the lamps, and the candles.

Long shutters, masking the snowy wastes outside, are drawn over the real glass windows.

Golden trumpets and tall harps, shining grey spears, and silver crooks lean against the walls that are solid slabs of oak, riveted together with copper, and on which are painted stars and wolves and hazel trees.

The guests themselves are a colourful crew. The King's wife is wearing a gay emerald dress, stitched all over with black and white devices, and her ladies seem to have plundered the rainbow itself for their brilliant clothes. The King's comely young sons sit in cloaks of shining purple with fringes of silver, worn loosely over white satin tunics; while the warriors, bards, and chariot-drivers are magnificent in crimson and blue tunics, or coats of deerskin with clasps of red gold, and they have sandals of white bronze on their feet.

The board itself groans under mountains of roast meats, fruits, pasties, confectionery, tall cups of mead, and drinking-horns of red ale.

It is a scene of great brilliancy and joviality, but the King turns from it with an uneasy frown. Last night his wife dreamt a dream that troubles and offends him In her dream she saw

three kings, and upon her asking them whither they were going, she had marvelled at their reply.

" We are three great kings, going to pay our homage to the greatest King."

The High King of Ireland, who is inclined to believe in dreams, does not relish intelligence of this sort. He is depressed at the thought of one rising who will be greater than himself.

Finally he rises from his seat and, going to the bottom of the table where his druid is sitting, the tall, light-haired King speaks to him.

" Conal, I am afraid this night."

The druid's eyes are like blue frosty flowers in his beautiful old face, and they shine now with compassionate amusement.

" That's a pity for you," replies the druid. " You might ask yourself if you have the *right* to be dismal when you have so much at hand to give you glee."

" True for you, little wise one," says his lord. " A king I am with sons to follow after me. I have the finest warriors in the land, and a palace full of all the choice things in the world. Everything is assured to my family for a thousand years. No man could be greater, yet this Celtic heart of mine is heavy. I feel threatened. I am aware of the presence of a strange new One, who is mightier than I am, who turns and says: 'To possess is not to own.' Come, Conal, let us look about my halls to be sure that no savagery lurks in any place."

They go through forty or fifty of the two hundred rooms of the palace, beginning with the treasury where the gold runs out like fire from the mouths of the leather bags, and finally reaching the druid's tower with its delicate bronze instruments and gauges for experimenting with stars and rocks and water.

The King throws himself into a seat beside the glowing brazier, and he stares moodily at its flying saffron flames.

" Look at the stars, honest man," he says, " and tell me what you see."

Conal goes to his telescope. He is a long time spying out the stellar spaces.

At last he turns to the King, saying, " There's a new star tonight, and under its benign and brilliant beam, across the sea, in the East, in the land of the Jews, the King of the World was born a few hours ago."

" I knew it, I knew it," cries the High King of Ireland, starting to his feet, apprehension in his proud, ruddy face. " What did the woman dream only last night, and now this news coming to me! Oh, I'm beside myself. What will he do to me? What

new threat is this? How large is his army? Tell me about this King of the World. Where is he? Where?"

"He is lying in a stable amongst the straw and simple beasts. His mother, a comely peasant girl, is bending over Him. The light is dim and smoky, but a celestial radiance is about the Child. He has nothing but a clout and the kind breath of the animals to keep Him warm.

"How poor they are—how *magnificent*!"

The King subsides with a roar of laughter.

"Oh Conal, Conal! What will you say next?" he shouts, tugging joyfully at his forked beard. "Where is your King in that wretched hovel?"

"The King is the little Child covered with a clout," replies the druid.

"Nay," cries the lord of Ireland, "no king was ever born without gold and silver and colours and fine linen. A king in a stable!

"Oh Conal, a little rude scene like that wouldn't knock a start out of me! They are not the shining ones! He is no king! I know what it is—you are trying to put a disturbance on me to rouse me from my humours.

"You are mocking at my foolish fears, and you are right to do so. I am restored. I am a man and a monarch again. A king in a stable! Now that is really something for my jester. I'll away to him and make the tears run from out of his eyes with this merry catch!"

At the door he turns, standing in his wonderful clothes, his cloak of gold descending to his feet, and he says: "But, by Angus, I will confess, Conal, that for a minute—for a minute—you had me frightened!"

The druid stands listening to the footfalls as they die away. He goes to the casement and looks out.

He sees the new star in the heavens shining mildly over the land and over the world. He sees that proud red Mars and Jupiter are in the eclipse.

He is about to turn into the room again when he sees a frozen redbreast lying in the snow on the window-sill.

He draws in the pitiful mite and, thrusting the bird against his heart under his silk shirt, he goes and sits in the warmth of the brazier, musing, and stroking the frozen little head.

He is thinking of the new star, and the new King. Some strange happiness comes to him.

He smiles tenderly, secretly.

Rocking a little, he suddenly says softly to the reviving bird:

" Gold and silver don't make kings. Even you, my little one, know that . . .

" Gold and silver don't make kings. Love comes first. You have to be born—royal."

Carol

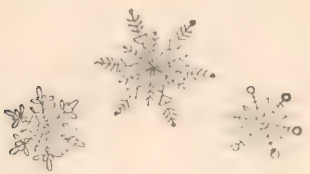
by W. R. Rodgers

DEEP in the fading leaves of night
There lay the flower that darkness knows,
Till winter stripped and brought to light
The most incomparable Rose
That blows, that blows.

The flashing mirrors of the snow
Keep turning and returning still:
To see the lovely child below
And hold him is their only will;
Keep still, keep still.

And to let go his very cry
The clinging echoes are so slow
That still his wail they multiply
Though he lie singing now below,
So low, so low.

Even the doves forget to grieve
And gravely to his greeting fly
And the lone places that they leave
All follow and are standing by
On high, on high.



THE PICTURE

Day by day, that painted phantom on the wall looked down, smiling

by WALTER DE LA MARE

LUCIA drew back at last from the shelter and shadow of the crimson, black-lined curtain. Its folds screened an upper window, a shallow bow in shape. From out of its small panes she had been watching her husband.

In this last strange year, the first of her married life, she had learnt many things about him. She had learnt that his loyalty and tenderness, his unwearying, secret consideration for her were not merely due to the funny little fact that simply could not be denied—that he was years and years older than she was; but also because he was wholly himself and—well, loved her.

As she loved him? That question, as she had stood, one hand gently resting on the curtain, her dark eyes fixed, had again crept like some predatory little animal into her thoughts. Could it possibly be as much? This dreadful question of age. He seemed to be so much less apprehensive of his leaving her than was she of his going. Besides . . .

The rounded lids above those unusually dark eyes echoed, as it were, the curve of cheek and chin. Her other hand lay on her breast.

The sun shone hot on the flawed eighteenth-century glass of the white-framed window. This room of her husband's was like a little hothouse in the sunshine of early afternoon; and presently she would draw the black-lined, crimson curtains to keep it cool for his coming back.

Another thing she had learnt was that, to him, habit of spirit, of mind and body resembled the serene sky of a St. Martin's summer. Then why—instead of quietly busying himself with trowel or spud—was he merely standing looking down on a bed crammed with sweet williams in full bloom? Palest pink, auricular eyes, scarlet, blood-red, deepest crimson—his favourite flower.

"Second childhood, my dear," he had remarked more than once, as they had stood there, admiring them together. "I might as well be five again, in a holland pinafore, and my mother . . ."

Oh yes, that was all very well, but it could not surely explain his present dejected attitude? Or similar far-away ponderings, meditations, usually ending when challenged with an unintended sigh and a prolonged smile—a smile somehow not the less inscrutable because it was so loving.

Why should loving anybody ever leave *any* human heart sorrowful? Whereas—pent up, hot, and reviling herself beyond words, realizing, facing her own miserable jealousy—it now often left her not only sorrowful but almost faint with doubt and remorse?

With one sweep of her arm she drew the curtain across the window, and turned, completely concealed by it, towards the portrait again. She knew by rote every inch of it. She was letter-perfect.

Harriet, his first love, his first wife. A second string, of course, *need* not play the less sweetly because there was once a first. It is itself to blame if it jar its own music.

She had married, realizing perfectly well that in every human soul there is room for two, for three or four, perhaps; and that no beloved image in a heart of any depth and fidelity can ever wholly oust, or be ousted by, another.

She knew, too, that for weeks past she had consistently ignored what had rapidly become a sort of idiotic and even frightening obsession. Age cannot but live a good deal in the past, and especially perhaps in the company of a long-gone childhood. She didn't mind, in the least, complete hours stolen from her in tender remembrances of that kind; so far-away and enduring too.

But couldn't he, *shouldn't* he have seen that this portrait—with its never-ceasing share of a life beyond the grave, was all wrong? And for all three of them?

It was mean, odious, idiotic, and—yes, why deny it?—an almost insane speculation, to let anything like that fester and corrupt in her mind. And yet, in her present nerve-racked, unfamiliar condition, she could no more rid herself of this mental misery than one can immediately cure any bodily ill.

She had tried—bitterly, intensely—and had failed. Day by day to continue to enter this room, whether vacant or with her husband there, quietly reading or writing in his chair, and that smiling, painted phantom on the wall, continually surveying the scene which she had been compelled to surrender, had become an impossible burden. Merely to discover somehow, without any direct question—impossible thought!—without any sinuous probings even, exactly how she stood, and how *she* stood! This at last had become a sheer necessity.

She couldn't bear the suspense. If in her present condition it could not be satisfied—well, how live on? Like this? Once a busy spectre begins to frequent the mind you never—she had discovered this long ago—you never know even yourself what devils it may not at length invite in.

Her husband's thinning face, those tranquil, grey-blue eyes, that had yet recently shown so many marks of weariness, what were they concealing? What *could* they be concealing—except thoughts, remembrances, and perhaps even gnawing regrets which she could not possibly share?

How was it possible to bring him to realize what was corroding away in her every vestige of her peace of mind? It was as if she had discovered a viper curled up in her work-basket. The answer to that question had stolen upon her only a day or two before.

Awakened suddenly and silently in the small hours as if a cold lean hand had gently shaken her by the shoulder, the vile device seemed to have sprung up in her sleeping mind like Jonah's gourd.

This bold and too-large portrait had scarcely ever been even so much as referred to between them. Why should it have been? It portrayed, not the Harriet who six years ago had died and left him, but the Harriet of more than twenty years before that. Very fair, yet not beautiful, at least not beautiful to most unheeding eyes. A young face, and yet a face full of the past, a face out of some old, extravagant, romantic story, a face unaware of what just one glimpse of it might bestow, a face which if it were once beloved—no matter what might happen—could be never really unbeloved: not deep within, and never forgotten.

Forgotten! Why at this moment, as if in the mere fact that it was refusing to look at her, it was an irresistible, an unendurable reminder of her own miserable trick.

Hating herself, as might a reptile engaged in devouring its own tail, she had stolen down from her bedroom in the small hours and had lit one of the candles here, on her husband's writing-table. Not even the angel Gabriel could have persuaded him to burn electric light. Perhaps she had been not quite awake. And certainly a nightmare-mind can manage things the day-mind would retch at.

However that might be, with an infinite disgust, she had at last mounted a chair and, with the utmost caution and skill, first by igniting, then by extinguishing the tiny flame, burnt through about two-thirds of the cord behind the picture—the cord by which it was suspended from the wall.

Even the rotation of the earth may affect at last a hanging picture. So may a mere draught, the jar of traffic, passing footsteps, and the slow, secret, incessant tug of the force of gravitation. Its fate was then suspended by a thread. Its downfall could be only a question of days. And then, surely, surely, he would be bound to betray himself. She would at last know.

It was perhaps in part her passionate nature that had made her so superstitious. Was *he*? Strangest of facts, she couldn't really tell. Not for certain. With a faintly whimsical smile, he would do a dare and walk in bravado under a ladder—paint-pot or no paint-pot. He preferred other numbers to thirteen. At sight of a magpie and solely on his own account, he would turn his head, spit, laugh, and apologize.

Once when she herself, after he had stolen behind her and put his hand over her eyes, had struggled free and had seen, through glass, the exquisite gold thread of the crescent moon tilted very low (old moon in the new moon's arms)—when his very aim had been to prevent this—he had seemed really shaken.

He had seized her hands, had kissed her cheek and mouth almost frenziedly, saying, "There, it must be all right now, mustn't it? God forbid!"

Well, surely if he was as superstitious even as that, she couldn't but surprise some exclamation, some instinctive disclosure, some dreadful change of face when in its own moment the portrait should crash to the ground! And now, she herself never for an instant ceased to be awaiting that crash. If only she had not come to hate and fear the face it portrayed, perhaps—but it was too late now. Or *was* it too late?

She stole soundlessly to the window again. An age seemed to have passed since she had last looked out. It could have been only a few moments. Her husband was where she had left him. Soon, he would begin his afternoon's potterings.

There was Turner, watering-can in hand, coming towards him. How dreadfully weary, narrowed in, even disconsolate he looked, as if all but worn out by some inward struggle. A shuddering revulsion of feeling came over her. Think of it! Some day she might perhaps be looking back on this from beyond an awful gulf of utter darkness. An evil done, even if it remain undiscovered, is an ineradicable horror, a scar no power in earth or heaven could ever remove.

Well, she was awake *now*. She must do her utmost to undo what she had done, and must chance discovery.

With trembling knees and hands, she dragged up a chair, mounted it, and with both arms extended, attempted to lift the portrait from the wall. To snap and re-knot the cord while it

hung there was out of the question. But the frame was heavier even than she had expected. The cord refused to unloop itself from its hook.

Her heart continued steadily thundering against the cage of her ribs. She tried again, and was compelled to desist. Very gradually she allowed the portrait to slide down the full length of the cord again; but the strain was too great, and even as, with a murderous splintering of glass, it crashed to the floor, she heard his step along the corridor outside. In sheer panic she leapt from the chair, stumbled, all but fell, attempted to escape, and met him full in the doorway.

"Why, my dear, my dear! You poor thing, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Her teeth were chattering, she had begun to hiccup.

"I tried, I tried," she was almost shouting at him. "I had been watching you. I was anxious about you. Don't look. Come away. It was a miserable deception—worse. I can't bear it."

"Watching me?" he repeated. "Couldn't bear it—can't bear what?"

His face had gone a deadly grey, even his lips. "Just *that*? My own dear, loved, loving thing. How can *that* matter? Anxious about me? I should have to have told you soon. But I don't understand. Why, only a week or two ago I—you know how mere time wears out everybody, and I . . . And now," he added, turning towards the wall, "*this* horrible thing has happened. It must have startled you to death."

Still clasping her hand, he stooped over the portrait lying face downwards on the floor, and lifted the end of the severed cord. No attentive eye could have been deceived by that.

"Why," he began meditatingly, "how queer! That's not an ordinary . . . It's charred. It's been . . ."

Releasing her hand, he turned to look at her. The dark distraught face, fingers clenched, eyes shut, seemed to be as brightly illuminated in the half-curtained room as some ridiculous painted clown's in the limelight of the stage.

"It was I, me," she was saying. "I fancied she—you—I . . . I *must* go now. What did you mean, what did you *mean* by 'I should have told you soon?' Not that—*that*." She nodded her head towards the fallen portrait.

"That!" he exclaimed. "You poor, precious, angel thing. My dear, my dear! *That!* Why, I hadn't a notion! It was only—only the letter that came from—that was enclosed with Dr. Brown's. I fancied you had guessed it had—it had not been very favourable. But, my own dear, we had both foreseen it, known

it, realized it—underneath. Hadn't we? When one is so old . . . well, one can't go on—indefinitely."

The words ceased. He was gazing at the back of the picture . . . "What a lucky thing," he added, smiling serenely up into her face, "that we knew all along things weren't quite right."

* * *

COVER CHARGE!

When we were all assembled, George Moore said, with an air of diffidence, "Gentlemen, dinner tonight will be at best an experiment. I have engaged a new cook. She was well recommended. We shall soon see what her capabilities are."

He sat at the head of an oval table with his back to the garden and the street. In the quiet cul-de-sac nothing stirred; neither vehicles nor foot passengers entered Ely Place after sundown. The soup passed scrutiny. Moore was acting as a gourmet of the most exquisite taste before his guests. He had been in France and we were paying for it.

"It is impossible to convince a cook that she should heat the tureen before pouring in the soup. In these old houses the stairs to the kitchen are enough to cool the soup. The real test of a cook, however, is the omelette. Now we shall see."

If his attitudinizing had not been so characteristic it would have been boring. But Moore managed to make affectation an effective part of himself.

He lifted the lid of the chafing-dish. He replaced it with an exclamation. He went hurriedly into his hall, opened the hall door, and blew a police whistle. He returned with a young constable whose helmet was held respectfully under his arm. Moore again raised the lid of the dish and, pointing to the omelette, said, "Look at that!" While the lid was coming off, the constable's helmet was being put on. The constable gazed at the omelette, looked at us all, and then at the omelette. Moore said, "I want you to arrest the perpetrator of that atrocity." The young policeman stood bewildered . . .

I wondered if Moore had not gone too far by bringing in the police. It might be a *cause célèbre* for a week if it got into the newspaper . . .

The constable at last spoke: "On what charge, sir?"

For a moment Moore was nonplussed. Then he rallied and, lifting the lid, pointed with it. "That is no omelette. Go down and arrest her for obtaining money under false pretences."

OLIVER ST. JOHN GOGARTY,
It Isn't This Time of Year at All!

MAIDENHAIR FERN

Friday, the thirteenth, was Maman's birthday—the champagne was in the bucket

by CARYL BRAHMS

ALL day long it had been stifling. Flowers fairly wilted before you could carry them home from the market. Horses were falling down in the streets. Sensible people stayed at home behind the jalousies.

But with the cool of the evening, they too ventured forth and were to be seen sitting at the café tables fanning themselves.

On his way home from the office, young Monsieur Gustave had dropped in to the Grand Café de l'Univers et de la Gare, as usual, and was sitting at a table with his friend, Monsieur Michel. The Café de l'Univers et de la Gare had been opened only a couple of years ago in 1893, and so was still the sensation of Dijon.

"And you seriously mean to tell me that Monsieur Durand broke into your house in the dead of night to steal your Maidenhair Fern? I can hardly credit it!"

"It was a very fine fern," Monsieur Michel sounded almost defensive. "The salon doesn't look the same without it. I tell you, that fern had character!"

Young Monsieur Gustave consulted his watch, siffled the waiter for his check, collected his hat and gloves. "And you're quite sure the intruder was Monsieur Durand?"

"I got a good look at his face before he turned down the gas in the vestibule I tell you, my Old, there is no possibility of a mistake."

His Old clicked a shocked tongue. "Really," he said, "the things people do!"

At the gaunt lodging-house where he rented his modest and suitably inaccessible room, Monsieur Gustave stopped to speak to the concierge. As usual, she was sitting knitting in her office, a dark little cave at the foot of the stairs. It was mostly taken up by dog. But on the sill of the hatch stood a Maidenhair Fern that was clearly the pride of her heart.

"Ah, Madame la Concierge, what news of your daughter?"

Madame la Concierge beamed. Monsieur Gustave was such a gentle gentleman. Ever a kind inquiry on his lips!

"Ah, Monsieur Gustave, with these first accouchements you

never know where you are! And then, she lives so far away. I wanted them up in my second floor back, but my son-in-law, he wouldn't hear of it!"

Monsieur Gustave did his best to look surprised.

"But I'm expecting a summons to go to her at any minute—any minute, Monsieur Gustave—and I want you to take care of my fern till I come back."

"Your fern?"

"To you, it's just a fern like any other, but I assure you, Monsieur Gustave, this fern has character. I'd know it in a thousand!"

"You would?"

"I would," said Madame la Concierge firmly. "Take it up now, and mind you don't forget it. And remember, these Maidenhairs need watering every day."

"Every day, Madame la Concierge?"

"Every day, Monsieur Gustave."

Scarcely had Monsieur Gustave reached his room and put his burden on the wash-stand, when the Apparatus buzzed. Monsieur Gustave decrotcheted it from the wall. "Allô—allô?"

The frog at the other end turned out to be his rich Aunt Mignonnette—his only tante à héritage. "You have not forgotten tomorrow, Nephew?"

"Tante Mignonnette!" Monsieur Gustave played reproachfully for time. "Tomorrow"—he thought furiously—"that's Saturday, isn't it?"

"The conseil de famille takes place in the afternoon. A week-end in the country with the Family will do you a world of good, this weather."

"The Family?"

"Now, Gustave, listen to me . . ."

Monsieur Gustave listened to his Tante.

Monsieur Gustave looked at his plante.

Monsieur Gustave's natural prudence dictated his decision: "I shall be there," he said.

Numéro onze rue du Congrès was just a house like any other. But not to Monsieur Gustave, standing on the doorstep with his fern. To him, the sun, the moon, and the stars appeared to have taken up their habitation there.

For here lived Mademoiselle Sophie.

Their *fiançailles* had been under haggle for several Sundays already, and the lovers had little doubt that in the end a settlement would be arrived at to their mutual benefit, by Mademoiselle Sophie's Papa and Monsieur Gustave's Tante.

Now it so happened that today, Friday the 13th of September, was Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman's birthday, and the champagne was in the bucket. But Monsieur Gustave knew nothing of this, and great was his surprise upon finding himself embosomed —the wrong bosom—embraced, and his fern taken from him.

Impossible to explain that he only meant to leave his fern in Mademoiselle Sophie's care while he visited his Tante, when here was her Maman calling on heaven to witness her gratitude to it for sending the little Sophie such a kind, thoughtful, noble, generous possible-future-husband.

Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman bore her birthday gift—for so she claimed it—in triumph to the salon.

Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman was an exuberant lady. But she was also a vigilant chaperone.

"See, my Little," she cooed, taking Mademoiselle Sophie by the well-puffed shoulders and prudently increasing the distance between the young girl and the impetuous suitor by giving the girl a sharp shove in the direction of the salon, "does not our salon look handsome with Monsieur Gustave's distinguished gift upon the piano?"

"Yes, Maman," said the Little dutifully, and straightway started edging herself back to the thrilling danger zone of Monsieur Gustave's ardent proximity.

Toasts had been proposed. Healths had been drunk, compliments paid—"*On dirait, plutôt, deux sœurs!*" And the champagne finished.

Yet it was a sober Monsieur Gustave who stopped, on his way home, to look in at the lighted window of Madame Clotilde's flower-shop: *Ses Fleurs —Sa Couronne Mortuaire.*

And then, in a flash, his face brightened.

For there, in the very centre of the window, between the musty Immortelles and the dusty Honesty stood a Maidenhair Fern—the last one left. It was just like any other maidenhair fern, so far as Monsieur Gustave could see. Prix: 50 frs.

Should he acquire it? Monsieur Gustave lingered outside the flower-shop, pondering the point. Madame la Concierge had declared that she would know her own fern among a thousand like it. But would she . . .? Would she . . .?

Monsieur Gustave felt for his purse. A single coin, by great good luck a fifty-franc piece, was in it.

Slowly Monsieur Gustave raised himself onto his toes, slowly sank back onto his heels, and thus tittupping, toe to heel, heel to toe, broke into a siffle.

Monsieur Gustave was saved!

But scarce had he siffled a stave when Monsieur Gustave's tittupping came to a slow halt, and his siffle withered at his lips. For the firm figure of Madame Clotilde appeared at the window, and the last fern left disappeared from it.

She had taken his fern away. She was showing it off to the Widow Grimaldi. The Widow Grimaldi was opening her chain purse . . .

In his agitation Monsieur Gustave dropped his fifty-franc piece, and by the time he had dodged between the passers-by, groped in the gutter, been stumbled over and sworn at, and finally found his coin and rushed into the shop with it, the Widow Grimaldi had acquired the only fern left.

" And I must water it every day? " the Widow Grimaldi was saying.

" Every day. Without fail," Madame Clotilde advised her. " Above all in this weather."

Speechless with despair Monsieur Gustave held out his fifty-franc piece to the Widow Grimaldi. Misunderstanding his meaning, the Widow Grimaldi gave Monsieur Gustave a gifle. What kind of a widow did he think she was—grass?

With smarting cheek and a heavy heart, Monsieur Gustave went on his way.

In the hall Madame la Concierge put her head round the corner of her cave: " You won't forget to water it every day? " she urged.

" Every day," responded Monsieur Gustave, falsely.

And from that moment Monsieur Gustave stood committed to his Maidenhair Fern.

In the dead of night, when even Madame la Concierge was asleep, Monsieur Gustave stole forth on a desperate venture. He had determined to break into the house of Mademoiselle Sophie's parents to retrieve his fern.

The streets of Dijon were deserted. Numéro onze rue du Congrès was as dark as a witches' sabbath. There was not so much as a glimmer of gas showing through the fanlight in the hall. But at the back a flight of stone steps led obligingly to the salon.

Even if the noise of breaking glass were to rouse one of the sleepers, Monsieur Gustave would be up, off, and away with his fern before you could cry poker!

Monsieur Gustave possessed himself of a nice sharp flint from a handy grotto. But as he was about to fling it, Monsieur Gustave paused.

The sound of a voice—his own voice—came to him from what seemed to be a lifetime away: ". . . *And you seriously mean to*

tell me," Monsieur Gustave's voice was saying, " that Monsieur Durand broke into your house in the dead of night to steal your Maidenhair Fern? I can hardly credit it! . . . Really, the things people do!"

How shocked the voice sounded.

" Prig! " said Monsieur Gustave, and flung.

Crash! The good sharp flint had done its work. Monsieur Gustave dived into the salon.

" Poker! " cried out a startled, a girlish voice.

It was not the salon. It was Mademoiselle Sophie's room.

Who would have the heart to dwell upon the painful scene that follows? The wild accusations of the fearful girl, the wild reproaches of her frightful parents. Their night attire. The violent manner in which they shake their pokers at the incontinent villain. His unlistened-to denials.

The instant breaking-off of possible future nuptials. Mademoiselle Sophie in a swoon. Her Maman in a swoon. Angélique, the bonne à tout faire, in hysterics.

The Door! It was the end!

Monsieur Gustave's Tante Mignonnette was seated at the head of the dining-room table. Her near relatives were polka-dotted down both sides. They were looking determined rather than hopeful. He himself was installed at the foot of the table.

And on the puce plush-and-bobble expanse between Monsieur Gustave and his tante à héritage stood a noble Maidenhair Fern.

The conseil de famille had been going on for some time now, and looked like going on for some time longer. For it had been summoned to consult on certain new dispositions in the latest codicil to Tante Mignonnette's will.

" And the jewellery," Gustave's Tante Marie-Rose was saying, " surely you would not wish your turquoise parure to go to the ignoble Maximilien, now that he no longer agrees to marry the young lady of your choice? "

Tante Mignonnette bestowed upon Tante Marie-Rose the kind of cold regard a suggestion from a mère-in-law deserved. " As to that," she said, " I am fully decided my turquoises go to my dear nephew Gustave, who is on the point of affiancing himself to the charming young lady I have chosen for him."

She beamed at Monsieur Gustave, who was gazing fixedly at the Maidenhair Fern.

" And the pedigree cows? " asked his Oncle Prosper.

" They go to Gustave, too."

" And the three-odd acres ? "

" What good would the cows be to my favourite nephew, without the grazing? "

Tante Mignonnette tap-tapped a tattoo on the puce plush—always her habit when becoming vexed.

But Oncle Prosper was in a mood to press his point: " So," he finalized, "our nephew Gustave gets your stocks "—he ticked an irate finger—" your shares, your rents, this house, the furniture, the pedigrees, the paddocks, the jewellery, the lot! "

" The lot," agreed Tante Mignonnette, " if he is prudent. Mademoiselle Sophie is a very charming young lady, well brought up, domesticated, dutiful, and of a loving disposition. And also she has a *dot* which is not to be sneezed at! "

" Atchoo," said Monsieur Gustave. And even as he felt for his bandanna his eyes remained riveted on the Maidenhair Fern in the centre of the table.

Tante Mignonnette tap-tapped.

Meanwhile, in torrid Dijon, Monsieur Gustave's concierge, still waiting for the summons to her daughter, was entertaining a guest—and a guest who had not called to see her empty-handed. This was Angélique, Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman's bonne à tout faire.

She had brought with her a handsome Maidenhair Fern. Would Madame la Concierge be so kind as to take care of it for her, while she went for her annual holiday?

For only that morning Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman had sent for the bonne à tout faire in the salon. " You see that kind of a cabbage there? " she had pointed to Monsieur Gustave's fern. " Take it out of my sight this minute. I never wish to set eyes on it again. It was given me by a monster! "

When her friend had taken her departure, Madame la Concierge peered at the plant and sniffed. It was not to be compared to the noble specimen that Monsieur Gustave was looking after for her.

Truly, it is a wise housewife who knows her own aspidistra!

How noisy a night spent in the quiet of the country seems to one accustomed to ignoring the clip-clop of hoofs and the rumble of carts on cobbles in a busy town like Dijon.

Monsieur Gustave, tossing and turning under his mosquito-netting, was unable to close an eye for the hooting of the owls, the lowing of the cows, the braying of the ass, the scratching and scampering of the mice, and the snoring of his relatives, rising and falling in a somnolent symphony.

Of what use counting sheep jumping over a hurdle? They only multiplied a thousandfold and melted into the fronds of a

Maidenhair Fern . . . Monsieur Gustave blinked himself bolt upright. He arrived at a desperate decision.

He would dress, pack, and purloin Tante Mignonnette's Maidenhair Fern. A note pinned to the little cushion on the dressing-table, explaining that he had been recalled suddenly to Dijon, would suffice to allay Tante Mignonnette's alarm. He would be as quiet as a mouse . . . No, quieter!

His toilet made, suitcase packed, his note speared to the pincushion, Monsieur Gustave, at great pains to make no sound, descended to the salon, negotiating the staircase, snore by snore.

It was dark in the salle à manger and Monsieur Gustave had some trouble getting the paraffin-oil lamp going. But at last he achieved a fairish flame, turned to the table, fell over the footstool, clutched at the plush-and-bobble table-cover in an effort to save himself, failed to—and the Maidenhair Fern came crashing down with him.

"Poker!" Tante Mignonnette's voice, firm rather than frightened, gave the alarm.

Monsieur Gustave fought furiously to free himself of plush-and-bobbles.

The ass brayed.

The train to Dijon was not uncomfortably crowded. Monsieur Gustave found a corner seat without difficulty. The only other passenger to join him was a plump little woman, like a pigeon. Monsieur Gustave, who was staring moodily at the window, did not even notice her arrival. The porter carried in her luggage, placed a wicker picnic-basket beside her.

"Be careful of the plant," entreated the woman. "Put it in the corner, opposite then it can come to no harm."

The train moved off. The little woman opened the lid of her basket, drew from it a luscious morsel of cold chicken, glanced uneasily at Monsieur Gustave, and ate it in as delicate a manner as possible. But she need not have bothered to be so nice. For Monsieur Gustave was still gazing out of his steamy window, rapt in some vision of his own.

And Monsieur Gustave's vision was clear enough, for all the smoke and steam on the window in which it was mirrored.

For Monsieur Gustave was seeing the salle à manger of his Tante Mignonnette, who was sitting tap-tapping at the head of the table, with her near relatives grouped along both sides and an empty place at the foot . . .

The little woman produced a bottle of wine. She poured a glass and held it out hospitably. But Monsieur Gustave did not notice. He was listening to a very painful conversation.

" *And the jewellery,*" *Tante Marie-Rose was urging,* " *surely you cannot still wish the ignoble Gustave to have your turquoise parure?* "

" *My turquoises to that villain—are you mad? They are for my dear niece Rose-Marie.*"

In the steam of the window Tante Marie-Rose relaxed. " *She is a dear good girl, if I do say it of my own daughter!* "

By now the little woman with the picnic-basket had thrown all pretence of polite concealment to the steam. She particularly enjoyed the drumstick, and this she ate without troubling to disguise her relish, licking each separate plump little fingertip when she had done.

Then she arose, brushed off the crumbs from her travelling-costume, and went down the corridor to wash her hands, leaving Monsieur Gustave alone with the Maidenhair Fern.

But Monsieur Gustave was listening to his voices.

" *Then,*" *his Oncle Prosper was finalizing,* " *our daughter Rose-Marie gets your stocks, your shares, your rents, this house, the furniture, the pedigrees, the paddocks, the jewellery, the lot!* "

" *The lot,*" *agreed Tante Mignonnette placidly.*

Somewhere in the world that is, an engine whistled. The train passed through a tunnel. Monsieur Gustave's vision was blotted out.

But by this time the little woman had returned to the carriage and was refreshing her fern with a bottle of Evian. " You have to water it every day," she explained.

Monsieur Gustave blinked.

It was a leaden-hearted Monsieur Gustave who, with hang-dog head and heavy tread, approached the entrance to his lodging-house, some hours later, although the Day of Judgment was still in the comfortable distance of the future, for Madame la Concierge was certainly still with her daughter and by now should have a grandchild on her mind instead of a Maidenhair Fern, for assuredly the summons must have come.

So Monsieur Gustave cheered himself up and came striding quite buoyantly through the hall where, from the concierge's cave, came a well-known voice: " Monsieur Gustave! Monsieur Gustave! "

The summons hadn't come!

With the Day of Judgment here and now and right in the cave on his doorstep, Monsieur Gustave turned tail and fled. And Madame la Concierge, carrying Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman's bonne à tout faire's Maidenhair Fern—much inferior to her own fine specimen in Monsieur Gustave's care, of course, but still quite tolerable in an impoverished sort of way—went.

hurrying after him. She wanted to leave this one in his care also, while she was away.

It is, indeed, a wise washerwoman who knows her own mangle!

It was still very warm that evening. All fashionable Dijon seemed to have crammed itself into the Café de l'Univers et de la Gare, and was fanning itself. It had been a sweltering Sunday and tempers were more than a little frayed.

At his customary table, Monsieur Michel was drinking an apéritif with his wife.

" Look," she said, " there goes Monsieur Gustave. I wonder where he's off to in such a hurry on a hot night like this? And look, there goes Madame la Concierge—and she's in a hurry, too. There, now—he's running. And so is she. Now he's turning round and coming back."

" Must have forgotten something," said Monsieur Michel comfortably.

" Madame la Concierge has turned, too. She's carrying something—it must be her new baby."

" Or her old fern."

" I'm almost sure it's the baby."

" If I know Madame la Concierge, it's the fern."

" There, now—they're crossing over—I suppose we shall never know."

" I know," said Monsieur Michel smugly. " There's nothing wrong with my eyesight! "

" And there's nothing the matter with mine," riposted his wife, strongly. " And I tell you it was the baby she was carrying."

" And I say it was the fern! "

" It was the baby! "

" It was the fern! "

" The baby! "

" The fern! "

" Baby! "

" Fern! "

Just then Monsieur Gustave doubled back again with his concierge coming after him! And now even Monsieur Michel's wife could see that it was not a baby.

This was too much. Monsieur Michel's wife made a grab at the first object to hand—the Maidenhair Fern that stood upon their table. In a fury she flung it at her husband. He ducked. It felled the doubling-back Monsieur Gustave.

While they are binding up Monsieur Gustave's poor head with strips of table-cloth and taking him home in a fiacre, a very different scene has been taking place in the salle à manger of

Monsieur Gustave's Tante Mignonnette from the one at which he had gazed so dismally in the steamy surface of the window of the train earlier in the day.

For, it being Sunday, Mademoiselle Sophie's parents had called upon Monsieur Gustave's Tante for the formal breaking-off of the no-longer-possible future *fiançailles*.

It is true that, from the outset, Tante Mignonnette had been tap-tapping on the curiously bare and exposed table. But this was the sole outward sign that her inner composure was in the least troubled. She herself might be harbouring the gravest doubts as to her nephew Gustave's sanity after his latest exploit, but before strangers she would defend him to the last cow and acre—family feeling demanded it. Was not blood thicker than vin du pays?

It was Tante Mignonnette's dearest wish to see her favourite nephew married to the right young girl—the young girl of Tante Mignonnette's choice—with the right *dot*—the *dot* that Tante Mignonnette had haggled out of her parents—safely settled down with a dear little Mignonnette of their own, who closely resembled Tante Mignonnette. Opposition to this cherished plan served but to stiffen la Tante's resolve.

" So you wish to break off the match? " Tante Mignonnette fixed Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman with a firm, undaunted regard. " No doubt, Madame, you know what is best for your own daughter—Such pretty hair! Is the wave natural?—But, as I said to my nephew—my *favourite* nephew "—Here Tante Mignonnette switched her firm regard to Mademoiselle Sophie's Papa—" ' Gustave,' I said, ' we must be prudent. We must consider carefully, is Mademoiselle Sophie—oh, a pretty enough little thing, I grant you—but is she quite up to running the solid establishment I intend to provide you with? ' "

" *Intend*, Madame? " Mademoiselle Sophie's Papa was quick to follow up a point, even if it were only from force of habit.

" Intend, Monsieur. And my nephew—well, Gustave is so hot-blooded "—The regard switched back to Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman—" particularly in this weather! But we, Madame, are women of the world, and understand how it is with men in these affairs! And with young girls, too, for that matter! "

Mademoiselle Sophie's Maman winced.

" Gustave, as I was saying, cared nothing that the girl is a green little goose . . ."

" A goose, Madame? " la Maman took her up sharply.

" A goose," repeated Tante Mignonnette playfully. " You must teach her to manage our six-room house as you do, Madame! "

" Eight rooms," said le Papa, automatically.

The regard switched. Then: " Eight rooms," agreed la Tante amiably. " The dear boy is so much in love—and who can wonder at it?—for they would have made the handsomest pair in the village."

" In Dijon, Madame, in a house in the next street but one to our own? " La Maman must have noticed an *A Vendre* board.

" In Dijon," acquiesced Tante Mignonnette.

" And by way of jewellery? "

" The little Sophie would look very well in corals."

" Very well," agreed the proud Papa, a little too quickly.

" She would look even better in turquoises," said la Maman, only just in time.

" As to that," la Tante said, smoothly, " I had always intended to give la Petite my turquoise parure on her wedding-day." La Tante gazed straight at the ceiling as though directly daring it to challenge this statement.

La Maman relaxed.

" And now," said Monsieur Gustave's Tante, " what sum do you propose to allow the young couple, annually, towards the upkeep of this ambitious establishment? "

By almost imperceptible *démarches* the battle had gone to the strong. Both sides were victors. The matchmaking was on again.

The following morning Monsieur Gustave remained in bed. It was the doctor's orders. Indeed, he had given Monsieur Gustave quite a lecture on not overdoing it.

" The human mechanism," he explained, " is like that of a delicate plant . . . or shall I say a fern with many fronds? "

" No," said Monsieur Gustave.

Soon after lunch Monsieur Michel dropped in to see how the invalid was doing. " My wife would have come with me, but she is quite prostrate—it was the shock," he explained.

Monsieur Gustave shook a sympathetic head—it hurt him.

" But she has charged me to bring you this little present, with her best wishes for your rapid recovery."

And Monsieur Michel tore off the wrappings to reveal a Maidenhair Fern.

A little later Monsieur Gustave had another caller. His Tante Mignonnette had come post-haste from the country to see for herself that her favourite nephew was being looked after properly.

" You must have had it on you all the week-end," she opined.

" Oh no! Indeed, that was the point! " Monsieur Gustave endeavoured to explain.

Tante Mignonnette felt his bandages. Still feverish, she decided. " I have brought you something from the country—something to make your room look brighter. You may be having some important visitors soon," she told him playfully—playfully for Tante Mignonnette, that is. And she took up the object she had set down.

It was a Maidenhair Fern.

Scarcely had Tante Mignonnette departed when two more guests appeared for Monsieur Gustave. They were Mademoiselle Sophie's parents, who, hearing of his misadventure, had hurried over to assure themselves that all was not ruined.

" Bygones are bygones," said le Papa.

" And turquoises, turquoises," said la Maman unaccountably.

Monsieur Gustave blinked. But la Maman was speaking again: " Outside waits one who has a gift for you—a simple enough object, but then, we know you have a liking for such things. Open the door, Vercingétorix—the Little can enter now! "

And there, on the threshold of this miscreant's room stood an angel straight from heaven, a Maidenhair Fern in her hands.

And this was not all. For scarce had Monsieur Gustave's temperature jumped a point when there was yet another knock at the door. Madame la Concierge's summons had come. In fact the baby was already there—a sweet little girl who resembled her father not at all. And would Monsieur Gustave be kind enough to take her friend's Maidenhair Fern also into his keeping?

It was not as grandiose a specimen as the one she had already left in his charge—and here the concierge looked round for it, failed to see it, and supposed that it was standing on the window-sill behind the curtains drawn to shield Monsieur Gustave's suffering eyes from the glare of the sun. But poor as was the fern that her friend had left with her, it still had far more character than any of the so-called Maidenhairs here! Madame la Concierge sniffed.

It is indeed a wise cook who knows her own onions!

And that reminded Madame la Concierge . . . The christening was taking place next month.

Would Monsieur Gustave be kind enough to look after her dog for her?

★ ★ ★

The gambling known as business looks with austere disfavour on the business known as gambling.

AMBROSE BIERCE

★ SCIENCE FICTION CHOICE

SEVENTH VICTIM

"I'm probably being killed tonight," she said quietly

by ROBERT SHECKLEY

STANTON FRELAINE sat at his desk, trying to look as busy as an executive should at nine-thirty in the morning. It was impossible. He couldn't concentrate on the advertisement he had written the previous night, couldn't think about business. All he could do was wait until the mail came. He had been expecting his notification for two weeks now. The government was behind schedule, as usual.

The glass door of his office was marked *Morger and Frelaine, Clothiers.* It opened, and E. J. Morger walked in, limping slightly from his old gun-shot wound. His shoulders were bent; but at the age of seventy-three, he wasn't worrying much about his posture.

"Well, Stan?" Morger asked. "What about that ad?"

Frelaine had joined Morger sixteen years ago, when he was twenty-seven. Together they had built Protec-Clothes into a million-dollar concern.

"I suppose you can run it," Frelaine said, handing the slip of paper to Morger. If only the mail would come earlier, he thought.

"*Do you own a Protec-Suit?*" Morger read aloud, holding the paper close to his eyes. "'The finest tailoring in the world has gone into Morger and Frelaine's Protec-Suit, to make it the leader in men's fashions.'"

Morger cleared his throat and glanced at Frelaine. He smiled and read on.

"'Protec-Suit is the safest as well as the smartest. Every Protec-Suit comes with special built-in gun-pocket, guaranteed not to bulge. No one will know you are carrying a gun—except you. The gun-pocket is exceptionally easy to get at, permitting fast, unhindered draw. Choice of hip or breast pocket.' Very nice," Morger commented.

Frelaine nodded morosely.

"'The Protec-Suit Special has the fling-out gun-pocket, the greatest modern advance in personal protection. A touch of the

concealed button throws the gun into your hand, cocked, safety catch off. Why not drop into your nearest Protec-Store? *Why not be safe?*' That's fine," Morger said. "That's a very nice, dignified ad."

He thought for a moment, fingering his white moustache. "Shouldn't you mention that Protec-Suits come in a variety of styles, single- and double-breasted, deep and shallow flares?"

"Right. I forgot."

Frelaine took back the sheet and jotted a note on the edge of it. Then he stood up, smoothing his jacket over his prominent stomach.

Frelaine was forty-three, a little overweight, a little bald on top. He was an amiable-looking man with cold eyes.

"Relax," Morger said. "It'll come in today's mail."

Frelaine forced himself to smile. He felt like pacing the floor, but instead sat on the edge of the desk.

"You'd think it was my first kill," he said, with a deprecating smile.

"I know how it is," Morger said. "Before I hung up my gun, I couldn't sleep for a month, waiting for a notification. I know."

The two men waited. Just as the silence was becoming unbearable, the door opened. A clerk walked in and deposited the mail on Frelaine's desk.

Frelaine swung round and gathered up the letters. He thumbed through them rapidly and found what he had been waiting for—the long white envelope from ECB, with the official government seal on it.

"That's it!" Frelaine said, and broke into a grin. "That's the baby!"

"Fine." Morger eyed the envelope with interest, but didn't ask Frelaine to open it. It would be a breach of etiquette, as well as a violation in the eyes of the law. No one was supposed to know a Victim's name except his Hunter. "Have a good hunt."

"I expect to," Frelaine replied confidently. His desk was in order—had been for a week. He picked up his briefcase.

"A good kill will do you a world of good," Morger said, putting his hand lightly on Frelaine's padded shoulder. "You've been keyed up."

"I know," Frelaine grinned again and shook Morger's hand.

"Wish I was still a kid," Morger said, glancing down at his crippled leg with wryly humorous eyes. "Makes me want to pick up a gun again."

The old man had been quite a Hunter in his day. Ten successful hunts had qualified him for the exclusive Tens Club.

And, of course, for each hunt Morger had had to act as Victim, so he had twenty kills to his credit.

"I sure hope my Victim isn't anyone like you," Frelaine said, half in jest.

"Don't worry about it. What number will this be?"

"The seventh."

"Lucky seven. Go to it," Morger said. "We'll get you into the Tens yet."

Frelaine waved his hand and started out of the door.

"Just don't get careless," warned Morger. "All it takes is a single slip and I'll need a new partner. If you don't mind, I like the one I've got now."

"I'll be careful," Frelaine promised.

Instead of taking a bus, Frelaine walked to his apartment. He wanted time to cool off. There was no sense in acting like a kid on his first kill.

As he walked, Frelaine kept his eyes strictly to the front. Staring at anyone was practically asking for a bullet, if the man happened to be serving as Victim. Some Victims shot if you just glanced at them. Nervous fellows. Frelaine prudently looked above the heads of the people he passed.

Ahead of him was a huge billboard, offering J. F. O'Donovan's services to the public.

VICTIMS! the sign proclaimed in huge red letters. WHY TAKE CHANCES? USE AN O'DONOVAN ACCREDITED SPOTTER. LET US LOCATE YOUR ASSIGNED KILLER. PAY AFTER YOU GET HIM!

The sign reminded Frelaine. He would ring up Ed Morrow as soon as he reached his apartment.

He crossed the street, quickening his stride. He could hardly wait to get home now, to open the envelope and discover who his Victim was. Would he be clever or stupid? Rich, like Frelaine's fourth Victim, or poor, like the first and second? Would he have an organized spotter service, or try to do it on his own?

The excitement of the chase was wonderful, coursing through his veins, quickening his heartbeat. From a block or so away, he heard gunfire. Two quick shots, and then a final one. Somebody got his man, Frelaine thought. Good for him.

It was a superb feeling, he told himself. He was *alive* again.

At his one-room apartment, the first thing Frelaine did was ring Ed Morrow, his spotter. The man worked as a garage attendant between calls. "Hullo, Ed? Frelaine here."

"Oh, hi, Mr. Frelaine." He could see the man's thin, grease-stained face grinning, flat-lipped, at the telephone

" I'm going out on one, Ed."

" Good luck, Mr. Frelaine," Ed Morrow said. " I suppose you'll want me to stand by? "

" That's right. I don't expect to be gone more than a week or two. I'll probably get my notification of Victim Status within three months of the kill."

" I'll be standing by. Good hunting, Mr. Frelaine."

" Thanks. So long." He hung up.

It was a wise safety measure to reserve a first-class spotter. After his kill, it would be Frelaine's turn as Victim. Then, once again, Ed Morrow would be his life insurance. And what a marvellous spotter Morrow was! Uneducated—stupid, really. But what an eye for people! Morrow was a natural. His pale eyes could tell an out-of-towner at a glance. He was diabolically clever at rigging an ambush. An indispensable man.

Frelaine took out the envelope, chuckling to himself, remembering some of the tricks Morrow had turned for the Hunters. Still smiling, he glanced at the data inside the envelope.

Janet Marie Patzig.

His Victim was a female! Frelaine stood up and paced for a few moments. Then he read the letter again. Janet Marie Patzig. No mistake. A girl. Three photographs were enclosed, her address, and the usual descriptive data.

Frelaine frowned. He had never killed a female.

He hesitated for a moment, then picked up the telephone, and dialled ECB.

" Emotional Catharsis Bureau, Information Section," a man's voice answered.

" Say, look," Frelaine said, " I just got my notification and I pulled a girl. Is that in order? " He gave the clerk the girl's name.

" It's all in order, sir," the clerk replied after a minute of checking microfiles. " The girl herself registered with the Board of her own free will. The law says she has the same rights and privileges as a man."

" Could you tell me how many kills she has? "

" I'm sorry, sir. The only information you're allowed is the victim's legal status and the descriptive data you have received."

" I see—" Frelaine paused—" Could I draw another? "

" You can refuse the hunt, of course. That is your legal right. But you will not be allowed another Victim until you have served as one. Do you wish to refuse? "

" Oh no," Frelaine said hastily. " I was just wondering. Thank you." He hung up and sat down in his largest armchair, loosening his belt. This required some thought.

Damn women, he grumbled to himself, always trying to horn in on a man's game. Why can't they stay at home? But they were free citizens, he reminded himself. Still, it just didn't seem *feminine*.

He knew that, historically speaking, the Emotional Catharsis Board had been established for men and men only. The Board had been formed at the end of the fourth world war—or sixth, as some historians counted it. At that time there had been a driving need for permanent, lasting peace. The reason was practical, as were the men who engineered it. Simply—annihilation was just round the corner.

In the world wars, weapons increased in magnitude, efficiency, and exterminating power. Soldiers became accustomed to them, less and less reluctant to use them.

But the saturation point had been reached. Another war would truly be the war to end all wars. There would be no one left to start another. So this peace *had* to last for all time, but the men who engineered it were practical. They recognized the tensions and dislocations still present, the cauldrons in which wars are brewed. They asked themselves why peace had never lasted in the past.

"Because men like to fight," was their answer.

"Oh no!" screamed the idealists.

But the men who engineered the peace were forced to postulate, regretfully, the presence of a need for violence in a large percentage of mankind. Men aren't angels. They aren't fiends, either. They are just very human beings, with a high degree of combativeness.

With the scientific knowledge and the power they had at that moment, the practical men could have gone a long way towards breeding this trait out of the race. Many thought this was the answer.

The practical men didn't. They recognized the validity of competition, love of battle, courage in the face of overwhelming odds. These, they felt, were admirable traits for a race, an insurance of its perpetuity. Without them, the race would be bound to retrogress. The tendency towards violence, they found, was inextricably linked with ingenuity, flexibility, drive.

The problem, then: to arrange a peace that would last after they were gone. To stop the race from destroying itself, without removing the responsible traits.

The way to do this, they decided, was to rechannel man's violence. Provide him with an outlet, an expression.

The first big step was the legalization of gladiatorial events, complete with blood and thunder. But more was needed. Sub-

limation worked only up to a point. Then people demanded the real thing.

There is no substitute for murder.

So murder was legalized, on a strictly individual basis, and only for those who wanted it. The governments were directed to create Emotional Catharsis Boards. After a period of experimentation, uniform rules were adopted.

Anyone who wanted to murder could sign up at the ECB. Giving certain data and assurances, he would be granted a Victim. Anyone who signed up to murder, under the government rules, had to take his turn a few months later as Victim—if he survived.

That, in essence, was the set-up. The individual could commit as many murders as he wanted. But between each, he had to be a Victim. If he successfully killed his Hunter, he could stop, or sign up for another murder.

At the end of ten years, an estimated third of the world's civilized population had applied for at least one murder. The number slid to a fourth, and stayed there. Philosophers shook their heads, but the practical men were satisfied. War was where it belonged—in the hands of the individual.

Of course, there were ramifications to the game, and elaborations. Once its existence had been accepted, it became big business. There were services for Victim and Hunter alike.

The Emotional Catharsis Board picked the Victims' names at random. A Hunter was allowed two weeks in which to make his kill. This had to be done by his own ingenuity, unaided. He was given the name of his Victim, address, and description, and allowed to use a standard-calibre pistol. He could wear no armour of any sort.

The Victim was notified a week before the Hunter. He was told only that he was a Victim. He did not know the name of his Hunter. He was allowed his choice of armour. He could hire spotters. A spotter couldn't kill; only Victim and Hunter could do that. But he could detect a stranger in town, or ferret out a nervous gunman. The Victim could arrange any kind of ambush in his power to kill the Hunter.

There were stiff penalties for killing or wounding the wrong man, for no other murder was allowed. Grudge killings and gain killings were punishable by death. The beauty of the system was that the people who wanted to kill could do so. Those who didn't—the bulk of the population—didn't have to.

At least, there weren't any more big wars. Not even the imminence of one. Just hundreds of thousands of small ones.

Frelaine didn't especially like the idea of killing a woman;

but she *had* signed up. It wasn't his fault. And he wasn't going to back out on his seventh hunt. He spent the rest of the morning memorizing the data on his Victim, then filed the letter.

Janet Patzig lived in New York. That was good. He enjoyed hunting in a big city, and he had always wanted to see New York. Her age wasn't given, but to judge from her photographs, she was in her early twenties.

Frelaine phoned for his jet reservations to New York, then took a shower. He dressed with care in a new Protec-Suit Special, made for the occasion. From his collection he selected a gun, cleaned and oiled it, and fitted it into the fling-out pocket of the suit. Then he packed his suitcase.

A pulse of excitement was pounding in his veins. Strange, he thought, how each killing was a new thrill. It was something you just didn't tire of, the way you did of French pastry or women or drinking or anything else. It was always new and different.

Finally, he looked over his books to see which he would take. His library contained all the good books on the subject. He wouldn't need any of his Victim books, like L. Fred Tracy's *Tactics for the Victim*, with its insistence on a rigidly controlled environment, or Dr. Frisch's *Don't Think Like a Victim!*

He would be very interested in those in a few months, when he was a Victim again. Now he wanted hunting books. *Tactics for Hunting Humans* was the standard and definitive work, but he had almost memorized it. *Development of the Ambush* was not adapted to his present needs.

He chose *Hunting in Cities*, by Mitwell and Clark, *Spotting the Spotter*, by Algreen, and *The Victim's In-Group*, by the same author.

Everything was in order. He left a note for the milkman, locked his apartment, and took a taxi to the airport.

In New York, he checked into a hotel in the midtown area, not too far from his Victim's address. The clerks were smiling and attentive, which bothered Frelaine. He didn't like to be recognized so easily as an out-of-town killer.

The first thing he saw in his room was a pamphlet on his bedside table. *How to Get the Most out of your Emotional Catharsis*, it was called, with the compliments of the management. Frelaine smiled, and thumbed through it.

Since it was his first visit to New York, he spent the afternoon just walking the streets in his Victim's neighbourhood. After that, he wandered through a few of the big shops.

Martinson and Black was a fascinating place. He went through

their Hunter-Hunted room. There were lightweight bullet-proof vests for Victims, and hats, with bullet-proof crowns.

On one side was a large display of a new .38-calibre side-arm. *Use the Malvern Straight-shot!* the ad proclaimed. *ECB-approved. Carries a load of twelve shots. Tested deviation less than .001 inches per 1,000 feet. Don't miss your victim! Don't risk your life without the best! Be safe with Malvern!*

Frelaine smiled. The ad was good, and the small black weapon looked supremely efficient. But he was satisfied with the one he had.

There was a special sale on trick canes, with a hidden four-shot magazine, promising safety and concealment. As a young man, Frelaine had gone in heavily for novelties. But now he knew that the old-fashioned ways were usually best.

Outside the store, four men from the Department of Sanitation were carting away a freshly killed corpse. Frelaine regretted missing the take.

He ate dinner in a good restaurant and went to bed early. Tomorrow he had a lot to do.

The next day, with the face of his Victim before him, Frelaine walked through her neighbourhood again. He didn't look closely at anyone. Instead, he moved rapidly, as though he were really going somewhere, the way an old Hunter should walk.

He passed several bars and dropped into one for a drink. Then he went on, down a side street off Lexington Avenue. There was a pleasant café there. Frelaine walked past it.

And there she was! He could never mistake the face. It was Janet Patzig, seated at a table, staring into a drink.

Frelaine walked to the end of the block. He turned the corner and stopped, hands trembling. Was the girl crazy, exposing herself in the open? Did she think she had a charmed life?

He hailed a taxi and told the man to drive around the block. Sure enough, she was just sitting there.

Frelaine took a careful look.

She seemed younger than her pictures, but he couldn't be sure. He would guess her to be not much over twenty. Her dark hair was parted in the middle and combed above her ears, giving her a nunlike appearance. Her expression, as far as Frelaine could tell, was one of resigned sadness. Wasn't she even going to make an attempt to defend herself?

Frelaine paid the driver and hurried to a drugstore. Finding a vacant telephone booth, he called ECB.

"Are you sure that a Victim named Janet Marie Patzig has been notified?"

" Hold on, sir." Frelaine tapped on the door while the clerk looked up the information. " Yes, sir. We have her personal confirmation. Is there anything wrong, sir? "

" No," Frelaine said. " Just wanted to check."

After all, it was no one's business if the girl didn't want to defend herself. He was still entitled to kill her. It was his turn.

He postponed it for that day, however, and went to a cinema. After dinner, he returned to his room and read the ECB pamphlet. Then he lay on his bed and glared at the ceiling. All he had to do was pump a bullet into her. Just ride by in a taxi and kill her.

She was being a very bad sport about it, he decided resentfully, and went to sleep.

The next afternoon, Frelaine walked by the café again. The girl was back, sitting at the same table. Frelaine hailed a taxi. " Drive around the block very slowly," he told the driver.

" Sure," the driver said, grinning with sardonic wisdom.

From the taxi, Frelaine watched for spotters. As far as he could tell, the girl had none. Both her hands were in sight upon the table. An easy, stationary target.

Frelaine touched the button of his double-breasted jacket. A fold flew open and the gun was in his hand. He broke it open and checked the cartridges, then closed it with a snap.

" Slowly, now," he told the driver.

The taxi crawled by the café. Frelaine took careful aim, centring the girl in his sights. His finger tightened on the trigger.

" Damn it! " he said.

A waiter had passed by the girl. He didn't want to chance winging someone else. " Around the block again," he told the driver.

The man gave him another grin and hunched down in his seat. Frelaine wondered if the driver would feel so happy if he knew that Frelaine was gunning for a woman.

This time there was no waiter around. The girl was lighting a cigarette, her mournful face intent on her lighter. Frelaine centred her in his sights, squarely above the eyes, and held his breath.

Then he shook his head and put the gun back in his pocket. The idiotic girl was robbing him of the full benefit of his emotional catharsis.

He paid off the driver and started to walk. It's too easy, he told himself. He was used to a real chase. Most of the other six kills had been quite difficult. The Victims had tried every dodge. One had hired at least a dozen spotters. But Frelaine

had reached them all by altering his tactics to meet the situation.

Once he had dressed as a milkman, another time as a bill-collector. The sixth Victim he had had to chase through the Sierra Nevadas. The man had clipped him, too. But Frelaine had done better.

How could he be proud of this one? What would the Tens Club say?

That brought Frelaine up with a start. He wanted to get into the club. Even if he passed over this girl he would have to defend himself against a Hunter. If he survived, he would still be four hunts away from membership. At that rate, he might never get in.

He began to pass the café again; then, on impulse, stopped abruptly. "Hullo," he said.

Janet Patzig looked at him out of sad blue eyes, but said nothing.

"Say, look," he said, sitting down, "if I'm being fresh, just tell me and I'll go. I'm an out-of-towner. Here on a convention. And I'd just like someone feminine to talk to. If you'd rather I didn't—"

"I don't care," Janet Patzig said tonelessly.

"A brandy," Frelaine told the waiter. Janet Patzig's glass was still half full.

Frelaine looked at the girl and he could feel his heart throbbing against his ribs. This was more like it—having a drink with your Victim!

"My name's Stanton Frelaine," he said, knowing it didn't matter.

"Janet."

"Janet what?"

"Janet Patzig."

"Nice to know you," Frelaine said, in a perfectly natural voice. "Are you doing anything tonight, Janet?"

"I'm probably being killed tonight," she said quietly.

Frelaine looked at her carefully. Did she realize who he was? For all he knew, she had a gun levelled at him under the table.

He kept his hand close to the fling-out button. "Are you a Victim?" he asked.

"You guessed it," she said sardonically. "If I were you I'd stay out of the way. No sense getting hit by mistake."

Frelaine couldn't understand the girl's calm. Was she a suicide? Perhaps she just didn't care. Perhaps she wanted to die.

"Haven't you got any spotters?" he asked, with the right expression of amazement.

" No." She looked at him, full in the face, and Frelaine saw something he hadn't noticed before. She was very lovely.

" I am a bad, bad girl," she said lightly. " I got the idea I'd like to commit a murder, so I signed on with ECB Then—I couldn't do it."

Frelaine shook his head, sympathizing with her.

" But I'm still in, of course. Even if I didn't shoot, I still have to be a Victim."

" But why don't you hire some spotters? " he asked.

" I couldn't kill anyone," she said. " I just couldn't. I don't even have a gun."

" You've got a lot of courage," Frelaine said, " coming out in the open this way." Secretly, he was amazed at her stupidity.

" What can I do? " she asked listlessly. " You can't hide from a Hunter. Not a real one. And I don't have enough money to make a good disappearance."

" Since it's in your own defence, I should think—" Frelaine began, but she interrupted.

" No. I've made up my mind on that. This whole thing is wrong, the whole system. When I had my Victim in the sights—when I saw how easily I could—I could—" She pulled herself together quickly. " Oh, let's forget it," she said, and smiled.

Frelaine found her smile dazzling.

After that, they talked of other things. Frelaine told her of his business, and she told him about New York. She was twenty-two, an unsuccessful actress.

They had supper together. When she accepted Frelaine's invitation to go to the Gladiatorials, he felt absurdly elated. He called a taxi—he seemed to be spending his entire time in New York in taxis—and opened the door for her. She started in. Frelaine hesitated. He could have pumped a shot into her at that moment. It would have been very easy.

But he held back. Just for the moment, he told himself.

The Gladiatorials were about the same as those held anywhere else, except that the talent was a little better. There were the usual historical events, swordsmen and netmen, duels with sabre and foil. Most of these, naturally, were fought to the death.

Then bull fighting, lion fighting, and rhino fighting, followed by the more modern events. Fights from behind barricades with bow and arrow. Duelling on a high wire.

The evening passed pleasantly.

Frelaine escorted the girl home, the palms of his hands sticky with sweat. He had never found a woman he liked better. And

yet she was his legitimate kill. He didn't know what he was going to do.

She invited him in, and they sat together on the couch. The girl lit a cigarette with a large lighter, then settled back.

"Are you leaving soon?" she asked him.

"I suppose so," Frelaine said. "The convention is only lasting another day."

She was silent for a moment. "I'll be sorry to see you go."

They were quiet for a while. Then Janet went to mix him a drink. Frelaine eyed her retreating back. Now was the time. He placed his hand near the button.

But the moment had passed for him, irrevocably. He wasn't going to kill her. You don't kill the girl you love. The realization that he loved her was shocking. He'd come to kill, not to find a wife.

She came back with the drink and sat down opposite him, staring at emptiness.

"Janet," he said. "I love you."

She sat, just looking at him. There were tears in her eyes. "You can't," she protested. "I'm a Victim. I won't live long enough to—"

"You won't be killed. I'm your Hunter."

She stared at him a moment, then laughed uncertainly.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "I'm going to marry you."

Suddenly she was in his arms. "Oh lord!" she gasped. "The waiting—I've been so frightened— "

"It's all over," he told her. "Think what a story it'll make for our kids. How I came to murder you and ended up marrying you."

She kissed him, then sat back, and lit another cigarette.

"Let's start packing," Frelaine said. "I want—"

"Wait," Janet interrupted. "You haven't asked if *I* love *you*."

"What?"

She was still smiling, and the cigarette-lighter was pointed at him. In the bottom of it was a black hole. A hole just large enough for a .38-calibre bullet.

"Don't play around," he objected, getting to his feet.

"I'm not being funny, darling," she said.

In a fraction of a second, Frelaine had time to wonder how he could ever have thought she was not much over twenty. Looking at her now—*really* looking at her—he knew she couldn't be much less than thirty. Every minute of her strained, tense existence showed on her face.

" I don't love you, Stanton," she said very softly, the cigarette-lighter poised.

Frelaine struggled for breath. One part of him was able to realize detachedly what a marvellous actress she really was. She must have known all along.

Frelaine pushed the button, and the gun was in his hand, cocked and ready.

The blow that struck him in the chest knocked him over a coffee-table. The gun fell out of his hand. Gasping, half conscious, he watched her take careful aim for the *coup de grâce*.

" Now I can join the Tens," he heard her say elatedly as she squeezed the trigger.

* * *

ABRIDGED NOTICE

I wandered across the field to the station once or twice, for here in Bolivia certain airstrips used by Panagra, the North American line, were graced with a small, painted notice-board telling the traveller where he was, at what altitude the place stood, how far it was to La Paz, when the airport was built and by whom.

The custom reminded me of the similar passion for statistics demonstrated by the engineers of the Fifth Army in Italy; they, too, gave their Bailey bridges names and added some interesting footnotes.

There were several such bridges over the Volturno, I remember, each bearing a painted board with some such legend as: *The Franklin D. Roosevelt Bridge. This bridge contains more angles* (or struts, or bolts) *than any bridge ever built. Built by the 24th Engineer Company, U.S. Army.*

A mile or so along the river bank there was another, and then others, each vying with its neighbours, rising eventually to a truly resounding climax: *The George Washington Bridge. This bridge contains more screws and was erected in less time than any bridge in the history of the world.*

It was all very impressive. Driving on down the river into the British sector, however, with whose engineers there was an amiable rivalry, one noticed, adjacent to the first bridge, a scrap of rain-soaked paper pinned to a plank.

In very small, blurred typescript it bore the sardonic legend: *There is nothing at all remarkable about this bridge.*

HOWARD CLEWES.
The Way the Wind Blows

A GOOD TIME WAS HAD . . .

I must say I have enjoyed this party most rechauffie I call it dont you Ethel

DAISY ASHFORD, *The Young Visiters*

This was to be her first party. Tonight, the ceiling rose higher, the lounge extended tense and mysterious. Columns of translucent tawny shadow stood between the orange shades of the lamps. The gramophone stood open, a record on it, the arm ready to strike. Doris not seeing Portia, Doris elate and ghostly in a large winged cap passed through the lounge with trays. Out there at sea they might take this house for another lighted ship—and soon this magnetic room would be drawing people down the dark esplanade. Portia saw her partners with no faces: whoever she danced with, it would always be Eddie.

Dickie came down in a dark blue pin-striped suit, and asked if she'd like to help him roll the carpet back. They had got as far as rolling back the settee when a sort of batlike fumbling was heard at the glass door, and Dickie stopped with a grunt to let in Cecil.

" I say," Cecil said, " I'm afraid I've come rather early."

ELIZABETH BOWEN, *The Death of the Heart*

Waxing Wroth

When guests are expected and dozens of chores
Have got to be finished by six,
Like polishing silver and cleaning the floors,
And the whole of the dinner to fix,
And setting the table and mopping the stair—
My husband's no shirker, by far.
The work is infectious—you see him out there?
He's busily waxing the car!

EVELYN AMUEDO WADE, *Help Wanted*

Rake's Progress

A little girl recited *Casabianca*, and another little girl *We are Seven*, and various children were induced to repeat hymns . . . I was then asked by Mrs. Brown's maiden sister, a gushing lady in corkscrew curls, who led the revels, whether I also would not indulge them " by repeating some sweet stanzas." No one more ready than I.

Without a moment's hesitation, I stood forth, and in a loud voice I began one of my favourite passages from Blair's *Grave*.

If death were nothing, and nought after death
If when men died at once they ceased to be
Returning to the barren Womb of Nothing
Whence first they sprung, then might the debauchee . . .

" Thank you, dear, that will do nicely," interrupted the lady with the curls.

" But that's only the beginning of it," I cried.

" Yes, dear, but that will quite do! We don't ask you to repeat any more of it," and I withdrew to the borders of the company in bewilderment. Nor did the Browns or their visitors ever learn what it was the debauchee might have said or done in more favourable circumstances.

EDMUND GOSSE, *Father and Son*

Eternal Triangle

A seat for three, where host and guest
May side by side pass toast or jest;
And be their number two or three,
With elbow-room and liberty
What need to wander east or west?

A book for thought, a nook for rest,
And, meet for fasting or for fest,
In fair and equal parts to be
A seat for three.

WALTER CRANE, *A Seat for Three: written on a Settle*

Here's to Next Time

This, I conclude, is becoming a good party . . . " Who *is* this awful man? " Can the question refer to me? I don my largest and most benevolent smile. Now I realize that the room is almost empty. I will not be among the loathsome last to leave, but I must find my paper hat.

" This is not the one I had first," I say. " The one I had first was old-style sugar-bag, blue as your beautiful eyes." " Get along with you," says the daily woman who came in to help. I get along. It is cold out in the street, cold and far too sobering. People, I am now quite sure, shouldn't invite me to parties. Let them give parties; let everybody else go; but let me stay away. They bring out the boor in me.

All the same, I shall go to Robert's on Monday. That's bound to be fun.

DANIEL GEORGE, *Lonely Pleasures*

LOVE OF SEVEN DOLLS

by Paul Gallico

IN Paris, in the spring of our times, a young girl was about to throw herself into the Seine.

She was a thin, awkward creature with a wide mouth and short black hair. Her body was all bones and hollows where there should have been curves and flesh. Her face was appealing, but it was now gaunt with hunger and the misery of failure. Her eyes were haunting, large, liquid, dark, and filled with despair.

Her name was Marelle Guizec, but her nickname was Mouche. She was an orphan, a Breton from the village of Plouharg, near Saint Brieuc. Wretched though she was, some of the mystery of this mysterious land still clung to her. It manifested itself in the grace with which she walked as though still clad in the swinging peasant skirts, the gravity of her glance, her innocence and primitive mind in which for all her youth—she was only twenty-two—were dark corners of Celtic brooding. One of these was now leading her to her death.

She wished to die, for like many young girls from the provinces she had come to Paris to try to succeed in the theatre. She had failed most miserably. There was truly no single soul in the world who cared what became of her now that she had been dismissed from the lowly *Moulin Bleu Revue* as incompetent and incapable of inspiring interest or desire amongst the patrons. There was no one who was her friend. The paltry francs she would receive would feed and shelter her for only a few days. After that she must starve or sell herself.

Do you remember Paris that May when spring came early and the giant candelabra of the chestnut trees in bloom illuminated the beautiful city?

Readers of " The Snow Goose " and " The Small Miracle " will recognize the sweet-sad flavour and the masterly touch of Paul Gallico in this extract from his haunting new story of Paris—the Paris of the street carnivals, with all its shabby gaiety, its heart-break, and its hopes.

The sun-washed days were warm, but the nights still cold and often windy. By day, Paris played at summer; the children appeared with their nurses by the Rond Point, the scent of perfumed women lingered on the boulevards, the gay shops glittered in the sunlight; the sky was a canopy of that particular blue that seems to exist only over France. But in the evening, the chill drove people off the streets.

It was for this reason that the early-season street carnival beyond the Pont de Neuilly was preparing to pack up and depart in disappointment, for it had expected to do most of its business after dark.

Only a few hardy stragglers defied the chill breeze and hung about as swings, whip rides, dodgems, stages, and tents began to come down.

By morning, nothing but the litter in the street and the worn patches on the earth at the side of the broad avenue would indicate where the fair had been.

In the draughty, outdoor, canvas-enclosed square that served the shivering girls of the tawdry *Moulin Bleu Revue* as a dressing-room, Mouche, having surrendered the scanty bits of costume that had been lent her, donned her clothes and reflected for the last time upon the collapse of her hopes.

The cheap strip show was packing to move on to Saint Germain, but she had not been good enough to keep even this job and go along.

At the conclusion of the final performance that night the manager had discharged her, saying, " Too thin, too thin, my child. Our girls run more to meat and juice. I heard someone in the audience say of you, ' Here comes that little plucked chicken again.' Sorry,

but you won't do. If a girl cannot sing or dance, at least she must look like something."

It was true. Mouche excited pity rather than desire.

Her story was the usual one of the stage-struck girl encouraged by perhaps a local success at some amateur theatricals. Orphaned during the war, she had lived with a great-aunt, who had likewise died when Mouche was sixteen. She had then gone to Saint Brieuc and secured a job cleaning the Town Hall, saving her money until she had sufficient to make the journey to Paris.

And there she had come face to face with the fact that she had neither the talent nor the physical equipment to further her ambitions.

She had been pawed by dirty men and stripped by agents and managers, who had examined the merchandise of her body and in the end had laughed and turned her out undamaged, for her innocence and chastity were an affront to their consciences and they wished to have her out of their sight.

Occasionally she had succeeded in securing a trial in the cabarets of Pigalle and Montmartre and this had kept her from starvation, but she was never able to hold a job, and, descending always lower, had ended with the strip revue in the street fair, and now had been judged unfit for this most miserable of forms of entertainment. Not even to the tawdry audiences that filed through the tents for a few francs could her body deliver a single, solitary illusion.

It was this that determined her to do away with herself, for the dismissal showed only too clearly that, even had she come to the point of selling herself to keep from starvation, she would have found no buyers.

Mouche looked about her once more at the chattering girls who at least were useful in that they could walk across a plank stage and make men shout, or laugh and whistle. Then she collected her few belongings and packed them into the small straw valise she had brought with her, as she had expected to be travelling with them in the bus to their next stop.

She would have no further need for these articles, but she could not bring herself to abandon them. The straw suitcase would be found standing on the parapet of the Pont de Neuilly in the morning when the police came with their long poles and fished her body out of the Seine.

She picked up the bag and, without a backward glance, went out of the enclosure.

Mouche, marching unseeing, like one already dead, towards the Seine, thought briefly of her childhood in Brittany, and saw again the blue-green seas crashing in white foam onto the black rocks, the sunny fields cut by crooked stone walls, and the flames of the poppies from the midst of which rose the ancient stone crosses and still more ancient Druid menhirs.

The fisherboats beat their way home; children played in the sand; the postman on his bicycle rode by; women stopped for a

gossip outside the baker's cottage, and for a moment Mouche smelt the fresh bread and crisp rolls. She was in church again and heard the rustle of starched head-dresses and the sigh of the organ . . .

Something, or someone cried out of the darkness: "Hullo there, you with the suitcase! Where are you going and what's your hurry?"

Mouche paused, startled and bewildered, for the shrill little voice was obviously directed at her, but she could not make out whence it came. The impudence of the query angered her for it had the effect of returning her to a world she had in effect already departed. The next words reaching her out of the darkness startled her even more.

"It's cold at the bottom of the river, little one, and the eels and the crayfish eat your flesh."

This was magic, and Mouche had all the Breton superstition and belief in the supernatural. Fearfully she gazed about her for the source of the voice that could guess her secret.

By the wavering light of a gasolene flare she saw only an empty puppet booth with an oilcloth sign across the top announcing, CAPITAINE COQ ET SA FAMILLE. Nearby, on one side, a dirty-looking gipsy fortune-teller was quarrelling with her husband over the small pickings while they occupied themselves with dismantling their tent. On the other, two men were engaged in loading a strength-testing machine onto a small truck. No one appeared to be aware of the presence of the girl.

The insistent, piping voice attacked her again: "What's the big tragedy? Your boy-friend give you the air? There's plenty more fish in the sea."

Peering through the smoky haze, Mouche now saw that the puppet booth was not entirely deserted as she had first thought. A doll was perched on the counter, or at any rate, half a doll, for no legs were visible, a boy with red hair, bulb nose, and pointed ears.

He was regarding her with impertinent, painted eyes and a curiously troubled expression on his countenance. In the shifting yellow flicker of the gasolene flare he seemed to be beckoning to her.

"Well?" he said. "Cat got your tongue? Speak up when you're spoken to."

In her first alarm, Mouche had set down her valise. Now she picked it up and walked slowly closer to the booth to examine this astonishing little creature.

Still feeling strangely indignant at being thus unceremoniously accosted, to her surprise she heard herself reply: "Really, what makes you think it is any of your concern?"

The puppet looked her carefully up and down. "Oh," he said, "out of a job, down at heel, and huffy too. I was only trying to be polite and pass the time."

"By speaking to strangers to whom you have not been introduced?" Mouche chided. "And getting personal, too. How would you like it if I . . . ?" She paused, realizing for the first

time that she was addressing the little creature as though it were a human being.

And yet, it was not really strange that she should, for its attitudes and movements were so real and even the expression on the painted face seemed to change with the angle of the head.

" Oh, I wouldn't mind," he concluded for her. " Everyone likes to talk about themselves. Would you care to hear my life story? I was born in a tree on Christmas Eve—"

There was a swift movement and a girl puppet appeared on the counter. She had golden ringlets, wide, staring eyes, and a small, discontented mouth.

She turned this way and that, appearing to inspect Mouche from all angles. Then she said, " My goodness, Carrot Top, where do you find them? "

The leprechaun puppet took a bow and said, " Not bad, eh? "

The girl gave a little shriek. " Gracious me, Carrots, you surely don't think *she's* pretty? Why, she's nothing but skin and bone."

Carrot Top, with a twist of his head, managed to look reflective. " Well, I'll admit her legs aren't much to look at, Gigi, but she has nice eyes and there's something about her that—"

" Country trash, if you ask me, and probably no better than she should be," Gigi murmured and, folding her hands piously, gazed skywards.

" Yes," Carrot Top agreed. " A country cousin, all right. But still, you know . . ."

Mouche felt that it was enough. She stamped her foot at the mocking little creatures and cried, " Really! How dare you two stand there and discuss me! Don't you know that is the worst manners? "

Carrot Top seemed taken aback and looked worried. He replied, " Dear me. Perhaps you are right. We've all been running somewhat wild of late. Maybe what we need is a little discipline. Why don't you try saying something rude to us? "

Gigi flounced petulantly. " Well, I for one don't intend to remain here to be abused by a scarecrow," and vanished beneath the counter.

Carrot Top looked after her and shook his head slowly. " She's not getting any better-tempered. Well, go ahead. I don't mind being insulted."

Mouche could not repress a smile. " I can't. I think I like you."

" Oh! Do you really? " Carrot Top contrived to look both pleased and startled. " That wants some thinking over. I'll see you later, maybe."

He vanished likewise but was immediately replaced by the fore part of a red fox with a long, pointed nose and a sardonic grin. There was a leer in his avid eyes and a worse one in his voice. For a moment he watched the girl warily, then appearing to smile a sly, oily smile, rasped at Mouche, " Hullo, baby! "

Mouche gave him a severe look. " Don't you hullo *me*," she admonished. " You're a wicked scoundrel if ever I saw one."

The Fox turned his head on his neck so that he looked hurt. "I am not. I can't help my looks. Come on over here and see. Put your hand out."

Mouche moved closer to the booth and extended her hand gingerly. The expression on the pale brow beneath her cheap little hat was half worried, yet she felt herself charmed. The Fox gently snuggled his chin onto Mouche's palm and heaved a deep sigh. "There," he said, "you see how you've misjudged me?" He cocked an eye up at her.

Mouche was not to be deceived. She remarked, "I'm not sure I have at all."

"Heart like a kitten," the Fox insisted, snuggling his chin deeper into the cup of Mouche's palm and then added, "The trouble is, nobody trusts me. You would trust me, wouldn't you?"

She was about to reply that she wouldn't dream of doing so, when he moved his head and looked up at her once more. His mouth opened and closed silently. Surely it was the smoky light and the dancing shadows, but Mouche thought she saw such an expression of yearning, such a desire for trust on the sharp, clever face that she felt herself unaccountably touched and cried from her own heart, "Oh yes. I would . . ."

She had all but forgotten whither she had been bound, or why. Nor did it strike her as at all strange that she should be standing there by the counter of a puppet booth, conversing with a scallywag of a fox.

Where she came from, one talked not only with the little animals of the fields and the birds in the trees, but the trees themselves and the running brooks, and often one whispered one's innermost secrets or heart's desire to one of the grey dolmens that stood so mysteriously in a meadow.

The Fox sighed again. "I knew I'd find someone innocent enough some day. What's your name, baby?"

"Marelle. But they call me la Petite Mouche."

"Little Fly, eh? My name is Mr. Reynardo, J. L. Reynardo—Rey to my friends. Where are you from?"

"Plouharg, near Saint Brieuc."

The Fox suddenly raised his head so that he was looking at her sidelong out of one wicked eye. He quoted from an old proverb, "Beware a sleeping dog, a praying drunk, or a Breton."

Mouche snatched her hand away and quoted back at him: "When the fox preaches, guard your geese."

Mr. Reynardo let out a yapping bark of laughter and retired to the side of the booth. "Kid, you've got some guts in that skinny carcass of yours. Hasn't she, friends?" This last was addressed to the workmen who had finished loading the lorry and were now standing by listening.

"She has your measure, old boy," one of them replied, grinning.

The fox yapped again and then called down below the counter, "Hey, Ali! Come up here a moment and see if you can scare this one."

The upper portion of a huge, tousle-headed, hideous, yet pathetic-looking giant rose slowly from beneath and stared fixedly at Mouche, who stared back. She could not help herself.

Mr. Reynardo performed the introductions: " This is our giant, Alifanfaron—Ali for short. Ali, this is Mouche and she's crazy about me."

Mouche started to reply indignantly, " I am not," but thought better of it and decided to let it go and see what would happen. The Giant seemed to be trying desperately to recall something and finally said in a mild, friendly voice, " Fi-fo-fe . . . No, no—fo-fe-fi—Oh dear, that isn't it either. I never seem to get it straight."

Mouche prompted him, " Fe-fi-fo . . ."

Ali nodded his head. " Of course. And then the last one is fum. But what's the use? I don't really frighten you, do I? "

On an odd impulse, Mouche solemnly felt her heartbeat for a moment and then replied, " I'm sorry, I'm afraid you don't."

The Giant said sadly, " Never mind. I'd really rather be friends. Then I can have my head scratched. Please scratch my head."

Obediently, Mouche gently rubbed the wooden head while Ali sighed and pushed slightly against her fingers like a cat. Once more Mouche felt herself strangely moved and even more so when the Fox yipped, " Me too, me too," like a child that has been left out of something, and came whipping over and leaned his head against her shoulder.

A battered and paint-shy old Citroën, with a luggage-rack on the roof and a trunk fastened to the rear, drove alongside the booth from out of the darkness, and a fearful and astonishing apparition climbed out.

He was a one-eyed negro in the tattered remnants of the uniform of a Senegalese line regiment, a wrinkled old man with a large, rubbery face, a naked, glistening skull, and a mouth full of gold teeth that testified he might once have known more opulent times.

He wore not a black, but a soiled white patch over his blind left eye which gave him a terrifying aspect though this was belied by an innocent and childlike grin.

There were sergeant's stripes on the uniform sleeve and he had an old World War I kepi on the back of his head. Around his neck was slung a guitar.

He took in the group and shook his head in marvel, chuckling, " Whooeeeee! Who you chasing up this time, Mr. Reynardo? Can't leave you alone two minutes before you go making eyes at something in skirts."

Mr. Reynardo leered at the Senegalese. " You, Golo! Cough up that ten-franc piece I saw you palm when you took up the last collection this evening."

The Senegalese grinned admiringly. " You saw that, Mr. Reynardo? By my life, you don't miss much, do you? " He fished the coin out of his pocket and laid it down on the counter, where the Fox immediately pounced on it, saying to Mouche virtuously, " You see? It's good someone is honest round here.

Golo, this is a friend of mine, by the name of Mouche. We're thinking of getting married. Mouche, meet Golo He's our orchestra."

Mouche found herself shaking hands solemnly with the negro, who bowed courteously and carried her hand halfway to his lips as though she were a queen.

Mr. Reynardo rasped, " Break it up. You'll be giving her ideas." Then to Mouche, " By the way, kid, can you sing? "

Mouche replied, " A little. Can you? "

" Oh yes," Mr. Reynardo admitted. " Heroic tenor. And I've got a friend who is a pretty good basso. We could have a trio. Hey, Ali, send the Doc up. Golo, you play something for us."

The Giant disappeared, to be replaced by a solemn-looking penguin, who wore a pince-nez attached to a black ribbon and was introduced by the Fox as Dr. Duclos, a member of the Academy.

The Penguin bowed and murmured, " Charmed indeed. Forgive the formal clothes. I have just come from the annual dinner of the Anthropofumbling Society."

Golo leaned against the dented wing of the Citroën and fingered the advance ghost of a melody on his guitar, then struck a firm chord, and thereafter, without further introduction, Mouche found herself singing the popular Parisian song hit of the moment:

Va-t'en, va-t'en, va-t'en!
Je ne suis plus ton amant . .

She had not much voice, it was true, but there was a softness and an ingenuous earnestness in it with a slight throaty quality that was young and pleasing and blended astonishingly well with the unctuous but not unmelodious tenor sung by Mr. Reynardo, supported and interlarded by deep basso " poom-pooms " contributed at the proper musical moments by Dr. Duclos.

Be off, be off, be off!
I am not your lover any more,
Another has taken your place . . .

The music completed the spell under which Mouche found herself and carried her away into this strangest of all strange lands of make-believe into which she had wandered out of the unhappy night. The song was catching the ears of their neighbours too. The fortune-teller and her husband ceased quarrelling and came nearer to listen, their gipsy eyes glistening in the torchlight. The workman and the truck-driver were clapping their hands to punctuate the *Va-t'en.*

A passing cab-driver pulled up to the kerb and got out. Late home-goers lingered. Other concessionaires came over from nearby pitches which they had been engaged in dismantling. Soon a considerable crowd had formed a semicircle about the dingy little puppet booth.

These were hard, rough people, mostly; the night was cold and the hour late, but they too succumbed to the spell of the odd little talking dolls, the music, and the new ingredient that had been added—the waif.

Even this brief space of time had seen a transformation worked in Mouche. The listlessness and despair had been shed. If anything, her gauntness, the hunger-thin frame, and the large, tender, believing eyes, shining from the pale countenance, added to the attraction as, in company with the sly-looking, amorous Fox and the pompous, stuffy, over-dignified Penguin, she acted out the verses of the song, playing first to one and then the other as though she had really changed lovers.

They ended with a shout and a thump of Golo's guitar, and his hearty chuckle was heard above the applause and bravos of the audience.

Mouche did not even notice Golo reach behind the booth for a battered tin poilu's helmet with which he passed swiftly through the crowd, or the response to his collection in bills and coins, for she was too absorbed with Mr. Reynardo and Dr. Duclos who were taking elaborate bows.

" You were in excellent voice tonight, my dear Reynardo."

" Permit me to compliment you likewise, friend Duclos."

To Mouche, Reynardo remarked, " You know, I could make something out of you, baby." And Dr. Duclos added importantly, " Your solfeggio is not at all bad, my child. I say, of course, that everything is diaphragm control . . ."

From somewhere in the depths of the booth a bell rang. Mr. Reynardo let out a yelp. " Oops! Supper! Sorry—Nice to have met you, kid. Come on, Doc."

The Fox and the Penguin disappeared beneath the stage. Golo regarded Mouche for a moment with the sad, creamy eyes of an old negro who has seen much. He said, " Who are you, Miss? "

Mouche replied, " Nobody."

" You brought us good luck."

" Did I? I'm glad."

" Where you go now? "

" I don't know."

His question had restored the chill to the night and the feel of the hard-packed earth beneath her feet. The fairy tale was over, then. Yet the echoes still lingered and her heart felt strangely light.

Golo nodded. To have no place to go was familiar to him. He said, " You excuse me, Miss. I better get things ready to move."

He went to the car and unstrapped the big theatrical trunk from the rear.

Someone at Mouche's elbow went, " Pssst! " Another half-doll occupied the stage, an elderly woman with a pronounced moustache and indignant eyebrows. She was wearing an overall and mob-cap and carried a duster with which she took an occasional wipe at the counter. When Mouche turned to her, she first peered furtively to both sides and then addressed her in a hoarse whisper: " Don't trust them."

Instantly Mouche was swept back to this other world. " Don't trust whom? " she asked.

" Don't trust *anyone*. I am a woman, and believe me, I know what I am talking about."

" But they were all so kind," Mouche protested.

" Hah! That's just how they do it. I am Madame Muscat, the concierge here. I know everything that goes on. You look as though you might be a respectable girl. The things I could tell you! They're all a bad lot, and if you take my advice, you won't have anything to do with them."

Mouche was not one to listen to gossip and Madame Muscat was exactly like all the concierges she had ever known. Nevertheless, she felt a pang, the kind one experiences when ill is spoken of dear friends. She cried, " Oh, surely that can't be so . . ."

Golo went by, carrying the trunk on his shoulders. He paused and said reprovingly: " You oughtn't to say things like that, Madame Muscat. They ain't really so bad. They just young and a little wild." To Mouche he said reassuringly, " Don't you pay her any attention, Miss. Wait until I put her in this trunk again. That will keep her quiet."

Madame Muscat gave a little shriek at the threat and ducked quickly beneath the counter as Golo went on behind the booth.

In her place there appeared then finally one more puppet, an old gentleman who wore square, steel-rimmed spectacles, a stocking-cap, and leather apron. The expression painted on his face contrived sometimes to be quizzical and friendly, at others, when he moved his head, searching and benign. For a moment he appeared to look right through Mouche. Then in a gentle voice he spoke to her, saying, " Good evening to you. My name is Monsieur Nicholas. I am a maker and mender of toys. My child, I can see you are in trouble. Behind your eyes are many more tears than you have shed."

Mouche's hand flew to her throat because of the ache that had come to lodge there. It had been so long since anyone had called her " child."

Monsieur Nicholas said, " Perhaps you would care to tell me about it? "

Golo appeared again. He said, " You tell *him*, Miss. He is a good man. Everybody who has troubles tells them to Monsieur Nicholas."

Now the tears came swiftly to Mouche's eyes, and with their flow, something loosened inside her so that as she stood in the garish light before the shabby puppet booth, with the single animated wooden doll listening so attentively to her, the story of her trials and failures poured from her in moving innocence, for she could not have confessed it thus to any human.

When she had reached the end of her unhappy tale, Monsieur Nicholas concluded for her, ". . . And so you were going to throw yourself into the Seine tonight."

Mouche stared, marvelling. " How did you know? "

" It was not hard to tell. There is nothing to seek for one as young as you at the bottom of the river."

" But, Monsieur Nicholas—what shall I do? Where shall I go? "

The puppet bowed his head as he reflected gravely for a moment, a tiny hand held to his brow. Then he tilted his head to one side and asked, " Would you care to come with us? "

" Come with you? Oh, could I? Do you suppose I could? " It was as though suddenly a vista of heaven had opened for Mouche. For she loved them already, all these queer, compelling little individuals who each in a few brief moments had captured her imagination or tugged at her heart-strings. To make believe for ever—or as the day was long, to escape from reality into this unique world of fantasy . . . She held out her arms in supplication and cried, " Oh, Monsieur Nicholas! Would you really take me with you? "

The puppet contemplated silently for a moment and then said, " You must ask Poil de Carotte. Officially, he manages the show. Good-bye."

The stage remained empty for an appreciable time. Then an insouciant whistling was heard and Poil de Carotte appeared, bouncing jauntily along the counter, looking nowhere in particular. As though surprised, he said, " Oh, hullo, Mouche, you still here? "

The girl was uncertain how to approach him. He was mercurial. His mood now seemed to be quite different. She ventured: " Monsieur Nicholas said . . ."

Carrot Top nodded.

" Oh yes. I heard about it."

" May I come, please, dear Carrot Top? "

The doll with the worried expression looked her over. " When you ask so prettily, it is hard to refuse . . . After all, it was I who discovered you, wasn't it? However, if you come with us, you wouldn't always be telling me what to do, would you? You know I have a lot of responsibility with this show."

" Oh no."

" But you'd look after us, wouldn't you? "

" If you'd let me."

" Sew on buttons and things? "

" Darn socks."

" We have no feet," Carrot Top said severely. " That's the first thing you'll have to learn."

" Then I'd knit you mittens."

Carrot Top nodded. " That would be nice. We've never had mittens. There'd be no money, you know."

" I wouldn't care."

" Very well, then, in that case you can come."

" Oh, Carrot Top! "

" Mouche! "

Mouche never knew exactly how it happened, but suddenly she was close to the booth, weeping with joy, and Carrot Top had both his arms around her neck and was patting her cheek with one of his little wooden hands.

He wailed, "Mouche, don't cry. I always meant you to come.

I only had to pretend because I'm the manager . . . Welcome to Poil de Carotte and the family of Capitaine Coq."

From below there sounded the sardonic yapping of the Fox, and the shrill voice of Gigi, "Why does she have to come with us? There isn't enough for everybody now."

Madame Muscat whisked across the stage once, croaking, "Remember, I warned you."

Ali rose and rumbled: "Gee, I'm glad. I need looking after because I'm so stupid. Scratch my head."

Carrot Top suddenly became efficient. "Not now, Ali. We've got to get cracking. Golo! Golo, where are you?"

"Right here, little boss." The Senegalese appeared from behind the booth.

"Mouche is coming with us. Find her a place in the car . . ."

The negro shouted, "Bravo. That's mighty good luck for us. I find her a place in the car."

"Then come back and strike the set, Golo."

"Yes, sir, little boss. Strike the set. I'll do that. You come along with me, Miss, and I fix you right up."

He picked up Mouche's valise and went with her to the Citroën where he stowed it in the boot. Then he looked into the back seat of the car which was buried beneath pieces of old clothing, newspapers, maps, bits of costumes for the puppets, and props, packages, a bottle of beer, a half-eaten loaf of bread, tools, and a spare tin of petrol, along with other masculine litter.

Golo began a futile rummaging. "Don't look like they's much room, but . . ."

Mouche took over. "Never mind, Golo. I promised Carrot Top I'd look after things. I'll have it tidied up in no time."

So bemused and enchanted was she that not once did she give a thought to that other who would also be there, the unseen puppeteer who animated the seven dolls. When she had finished, it was only the spare tin of petrol which had defeated her and she emerged from the car, searching for Golo to ask his advice.

Yet when Mouche discovered him nearby, she found herself unable to call, or even speak, so strange and ominous was the sight that met her eyes.

For the booth with all its endearing occupants had vanished from the spot it had occupied and now lay flat, a compact pile of board, canvas, oilcloth, and painted papier mâché, tarpaulined and roped by Golo, who was finishing the job with the sure movements of long practice. None of the puppets was in sight: they reposed presumably in the trunk that stood nearby.

But the pole with the flaming gasolene torch was still there and against it leaned a man Mouche had not seen before.

He was clad in corduroy trousers, rough shoes, and was wearing a roll-neck sweater under some kind of old army fatigue-jacket. A stocking-cap was pulled down on one side of his head and a cigarette hung from his lips.

In the wavering light it was not possible to judge his age, but his attitude and the expression on his face and mouth were cold, cynical, and mocking. His eyes were fixed on Mouche and she could see their glitter reflecting the torchlight.

It was like a chill hand laid upon her heart, for there was no warmth or kindliness in the figure lounging against the pole, his fists pressed deeply into the pockets of his old jacket. The shine of his eyes was hostile and the droop of the cigarette from his lips contemptuous.

Mouche, in her marrow, knew that this was the puppet-master, the man who had animated the little creatures that had laid such an enchantment upon her, yet she was filled with dread. For a moment even, she hoped that somehow this was not he, the master of the dolls, but some other, a pitch-man, a labourer, or a lounger from a neighbouring concession.

Golo, straightening up from his task, looked from one to the other, the silent man, the frightened girl, and presented them to one another elaborately, as though they had never met before, as though the man had not been able to look through his one-way curtain behind which he sat as he gave life and voice to his puppets, and study each curve and hollow of the girl's face, and every line of her thin body.

" Miss Mouche, this is Capitaine Coq," Golo explained and then turned to the man who had not stirred. " Capitaine, this here is Miss Mouche. Carrot Top, he find her walking along in the dark by herself, crying, and he stop her and have a talk with her. Then Mr. Reynardo, he find out she a pretty damn good singer, and Monsieur Nicholas, he come up and ask maybe she like to come along with us, after that old gossip, Madame Muscat, she try to make trouble. Then Carrot Top, he say O.K., she can come along with the show. I think that very good luck for everybody."

He paused, satisfied. Golo was convinced that the little creatures thought and acted as individuals and that the puppeteer was not privy to what they said and did, or what transpired between them.

Mouche, too, had been under the same spell, and the presence of the man confused and alarmed her and increased the turmoil of her emotions.

The man introduced as Capitaine Coq moved his eyes slightly so as to take in Golo, and rasped, " Well, what do you expect me to do about it? What did Carrot Top tell you to do? "

" To get the gear on the car, Monsieur le Capitaine . . ."

" Well, then, get on with it. And you drive. I want to get some sleep."

" Get the gear on the car. O.K., sir." Golo picked up the heavy bundle, but was slow in moving. The Capitaine barked, " Allez! " at him and helped him with a kick.

Now he turned his calculating stare upon Mouche, and for the first time, spoke directly to her. He did not remove the cigarette from his lips and it hung there, remaining horrifyingly motionless when he talked, for he had the professional ventriloquist's trick of

speaking without moving his lips, when he wished. "You, Mouche! Come here."

She felt herself hypnotized. She was unable to resist moving slowly towards him. When she stood in front of him, he looked her up and down.

"Now, you listen to me—" He paused and the cigarette-end glowed momentarily. Mouche felt herself trembling—"You can stay with us as long as you behave yourself and help with the act. If you don't, I'll kick you out, no matter what Carrot Top says. Carrot Top likes you. Rey and Dr. Duclos seem to think you can sing. That baby bleat of yours makes me sick, but it pulled in the francs from that crowd tonight and that's all I care about. Now get into the back of that car. You may have some bread and sausage if you're hungry. But not a sound out of you. March!"

Had she had her suitcase in her possession, Mouche would have turned and fled. But it was locked now in the luggage-boot and she had a woman's inability to part with her possessions, no matter how wretched they might be. And besides, where was she to go?

Half blinded with tears, Mouche turned away and obeyed him. She heard the scraping and thudding on the roof as Golo fastened the dismantled puppet booth to the rack and then tied the trunk on behind.

Capitaine Coq got into the front seat, pulled his stocking-cap over his eyes and went to sleep. The car, guided by Golo, moved off, crossing the bridge and turning north at the Porte de Neuilly, sought the high road to Rheims.

Huddled in the back seat, Mouche dried her tears and nibbled on the bread and sausage. She managed to derive comfort from the fact that, safe in the trunk behind her, tarpaulined against inclement weather, were all the little creatures who had seemed to like her. And she remembered that even Capitaine Coq had spoken of them in the third person as though their lives were their own.

Just before she fell asleep, she felt the trunk scrape against the rear of the car and she smiled, thinking of Poil de Carotte, bowed beneath his managerial worries, the hypocritical but lovable Fox, the unhappy Giant, the sulky, golden-haired girl, the pompous but friendly Penguin, the gossipy concierge who at bottom was a woman who could be trusted, and the kind and touching mender of broken toys. Surely she would be meeting them all again . . .

Another extract from "Love of Seven Dolls"
appears in next month's Argosy

WHITE LADY

An age in her embraces pass'd
Would seem a winter's day

JOHN WILMOT, EARL OF ROCHESTER

I saw fair Chloris walk alone,
Whilst feathered rain came softly down,
And Jove descended from his tower
To court her in a silver shower.
The wanton snow flew on her breast
Like little birds unto their nest;
But overcome with whiteness there,
For grief it thawed into a tear;
Thence falling on her garment's hem,
To deck her, froze into a gem.

WILLIAM STRODE,
On Chloris Walking in the Snow, 1632

Figure Skating

The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds; he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together. (For though we must pause not a moment in the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy. But if his senses were simple they were at the same time extremely strong) . . . A melon, an emerald, a fox in the snow—so he raved, so he stared. When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour—swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had

those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. Finally, coming to a stop and sweeping a curtsey with the utmost grace to the King, who was shuffling past on the arm of some Lord-in-waiting, the unknown skater came to a standstill. She was not a handsbreadth off. She was a woman.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, *Orlando*

Cold Heart

Now all things smile: only my love doth lower,
Nor hath the scalding noon-day sun the power
To melt that marble ice, which still doth hold
Her heart congeal'd, and makes her pity cold . . .
Amyntas now doth with his Chloris sleep
Under a sycamore, and all things keep
Time with the season: only she doth carry
June in her eyes, in her heart January.

THOMAS CAREW, *The Spring*

Snow Queen

When they were in the midst of their playing there came a great sledge. It was painted quite white, and in it sat somebody wrapped in a rough white fur, and with a white rough cap on his head. The sledge drove twice round the square, and Kay bound his little sledge to it, and so he drove on with it . . . Then the snow began to fall so rapidly that the boy could not see a hand's breadth before him, but still he drove on. Now he hastily dropped the cord, so as to get loose from the great sledge, but that was no use, for his sledge was fast bound to the other, and they went on like the wind. Then he called out quite loudly, but nobody heard him; and the snow beat down, and the sledge flew onward; every now and then it gave a jump, and they seemed to be flying over hedges and ditches. The boy was quite frightened. He wanted to say his prayers, but could remember nothing but the multiplication table.

The snowflakes became larger and larger, at last they looked like great white fowls. All at once they sprang aside and the great sledge stopped, and the person who had driven it rose up. The fur and the cap were made altogether of ice. It was *a lady*, tall and slender, and brilliantly white: it was the Snow Queen.

HANS ANDERSEN, *The Snow Queen*

Couleur de Rose

How lovely, lovely she had looked, as she came towards him through the falling snow under her red umbrella, with the pale rosy light over her half-veiled face . . . How lovely she had looked! He would always remember that. Everything had gone just right that morning. It all went to show how much luck there was in such things, how much a mere series of tiny accidents can mould one's destiny. A rainy day, after a long unbroken chain of days of sunshine, and everything has a new quality; a new background is provided, and one's beloved has a new beauty . . .

Might not love fade away entirely, but for just such surprises provided by destiny? Best of all had been the miracle of the snow, and her astonishing newness under the red umbrella. Good lord, how lovely she had looked: the red umbrella under the softly falling windless snow, her soundless approach through the deep virginal whiteness of it on the sidewalk, and the rosy light on her enchanting face, her face which, he had felt, must be cool to the touch! Ecstasy.

The whole thing had deepened at a breath, the wonder had become more wonderful, the exquisite silence about them had become infinitely suggestive.

CONRAD AIKEN, *A Man Alone at Lunch*

Handmaiden

Thou snowy farm with thy five tenements!
Tell thy white mistress here was one
That call'd to pay his daily rents:
But she a-gathering flow'rs and hearts is gone,
And thou left void to rude possession.

But grieve not, pretty ermine cabinet,
Thy alabaster lady will come home;
If not, what tenant can there fit
The slender turnings of thy narrow room,
But must ejected be by his own doom?

Then give me leave to leave my rent with thee;
Five kisses, one unto a place:
For though the lute's too high for me,
Yet servants, knowing minikin nor bass,
Are still allow'd to fiddle with the case.

RICHARD LOVELACE, 1618–58,
Elinda's Glove

TWELVE BELLS

"I weren't dreaming," said George hoarsely, "they rang in the night, just afore three"

by MARGARET BONHAM

IT was one morning in November that George made his find. He was sent to fetch some pig potatoes from a farm in the next village, old Elcombe's place. The day was sharp and smoky, leaves drifted from the branches; there was a silvery bloom of damp on the thatched roofs.

He took the farmer's open lorry and careered down the lane, whistling, passing his own cottage with a fanfare on the horn. His wife, embowered in frost-bitten dahlias, was hanging out the washing; she waved abstractedly.

In Elcombe's tithe barn the potatoes were already sacked. It was dry and dusty; the medieval rafters, thick with cobwebs, retreated ecclesiastically into the gloom above. George backed the lorry in, and he and one of the men started loading it. Elcombe, a saturnine old man, padded bow-legged round them and counted suspiciously.

As George took hold of the last sack but one, against the wall, he stumbled over something metallic. He bent down and picked it up. It was a bell.

George was a ringer and an enthusiast, and he recognized it at once, in spite of its condition, as one of a set of hand-bells. It was tongueless, handle-less, and covered with mud and cow-dung, but proclaimed the elegance of its shape even through a quarter-inch of dirt. He let go of the sack's ear and held the bell in both hands, turning it to the light.

Up came Elcombe, padding toadlike to his elbow, to see if anything was being stolen.

"It's a bell," said George.

"So 'tis. I mind the kids used to play with 'em, years back, 'twas."

"Them?"

"Dozen or so, different sizes; I reckon 'twas a set. I reckon they'm mostly lost now."

"Two-three in the harness-room, there was," said Elcombe's man. "I saw 'em a time back."

"You find 'em," Elcombe said to George, "you can have 'em.

Us got no leisure for bells. Get they sacks up, now, and let's get on."

"You mean I can keep 'em? Can I look for 'em now?"

"Look for 'em when you dang well like. Fred Copley's a-paying you, I ain't."

George's mind hovered, in passing, over the enigma of human nature. If he had asked old Elcombe for one extra potato he'd have come away with a flea in his ear, yet old Elcombe had presented him, unasked, with what was probably worth the whole lorry-load. He shook his head, mystified.

With the last sack heaved into place, and Elcombe and his man gone, he took up the bell again and stood alone in the ancient dust of the barn, a dark, youngish man, not tall but muscular, with a blueness of eye and slant of cheek-bone marking some forgotten Celtic ancestry, and his head full of bells. He liked ringing them in church, though his village peal was mediocre, but most of all he liked ringing hand-bells.

The set they had was cheap and bad, used for practising, and for carols at Christmas. They could not afford better; but once, he had handled good ones, in his wife's village ten miles away in the hills, and he had never forgotten it. The weight and balance, the ringing note exactly placed came back to him entirely as he held the mute shell in his hand.

Then he remembered that the others had to be found. The chances of unearthing the whole set seemed dim. But anyways, he thought, I can keep this 'un.

He took it out to the cattle-trough and dropped it in to soak; the muck was like cement and a wash wouldn't get it off. Mr. Copley, waiting three miles away for pig potatoes—at the Ministry of Agriculture rate per hour—never even crossed his mind. He began methodically searching.

After half an hour he had seven bells in the trough. Another twenty minutes produced three more. For the last two, made desperate by near success, he hunted with maniacal determination, and at last tackled old Elcombe's missus in her kitchen. Here, apologetic but relentless, he had her grumbling and ferreting till they were found in the boot-cupboard. They were dirty, but not caked like the others. Crossing the yard to the trough, he rubbed one of them with his sleeve and read the engraved letters of the maker's name, its number, and the date, 1832.

He fished the remaining ten out of the water, and wiped them with a handful of hay pulled furtively (for old Elcombe would have objected, might even, if he'd been looking, have charged him sixpence for its use) from the rick.

An hour and a quarter late, he drove back with the potatoes; the bells, rolling on the floor of the lorry by his feet, clinked with frosty insistence; and as if they played an accompaniment, George raised his admirable voice and sang.

At twenty minutes past seven, when he had worked an extra half-hour in the cowsheds to subdue his conscience and gone home and had his tea, he put the bells in a string shopping-bag and went out again, faintly jangling with each stride, to call on Albert Jones who led the ringers.

Albert Jones lived in a thatched cottage as low and humped as a tortoise, where sparrows, at ear level, muttered complainingly from the eaves when anyone knocked. The kitchen was warm and yellow in the lamplight, but full of Albert's children being put to bed, so Albert and George retreated into the parlour, which was full of mahogany and dark green plush and exceedingly cold.

Albert lit an oil-lamp under an icy white shade with pink roses round the edge, and George set out the bells in a row on the table-cloth. He had made his wife clean them with steel wool and metal polish while he had tea, and they gleamed with dark lustre. Albert could not keep his hands off them. He kept picking them up, striking them with a scarred thumb-nail, and above the babble of his children next door and the hiss of the lamp, the notes shivered and sounded, clear and pure as water.

At last he said, " I reckon they'm worth a mint. Must be off his head."

" Mean old b— old cuss he is too, mostly," said George, recollecting himself in time, for Albert was a churchwarden and objected to swearing. He added, " Still, they weren't no use to him where they was."

" Us'll have to get 'em fixed up now."

" Copley's going to market tomorrow, he'll take 'em to Ferring's for us. They'll get 'em done time we want to start practising carols."

" Who's going to pay? "

George was dashed; he had forgotten this. He said, " What'll it cost, you reckon? "

" Clappers and straps, and tuning up," said Albert. " I d'know. Two-three pound, I dare say."

George had eighteen pounds in his Post-Office savings account. After a moment's hesitation—since his wife had helped save this—he said, " Well, look, I'll lend it. Vicar might help us, and us'll make enough carol-singing to pay back, anyways. 'Twas more'n five pound last year, and I reckon us ought to do better with these proper bells. I'll chance it."

" I d'know," said Albert. " How about if it's more? "

" I got enough," said George recklessly, and he touched the largest bell with his finger and a ghostly sound came from it, and Albert, seeing himself defeated, gave way; he gave way uneasily, because he was strict about money and disapproved of squandering the carol fund in advance, but he coveted the bells very much.

George loaded his string bag again and walked home musically through the dark, in the falling leaves and the smell of bonfires, to the rosy lights of his cottage.

In the morning he took the bells to the farm and asked Mr. Copley to leave them with Ferring & Son in the town, with instructions on how they were to be done and inquiries as to cost and importunate messages about doing them quickly.

The next day he abstracted his Post-Office book out of the dresser and drew three pounds in a furtive way that made the Post-Office girl look at him sharply, and put the book back behind his toolbox in the cupboard under the stairs, hoping his wife wouldn't miss it till Christmas.

Albert went into the town with the money three weeks later and fetched the bells. It was by then past mid-December. He brought them round to show George the same evening, but George was out at a darts match, and so Albert, sniffing with faint disapproval, for he was a teetotaller, left them, but had the sense not to leave George's change as well.

George came in after closing time, glowing with beer, victory, and the frosty night. He was furious when his wife would not let him ring the bells and wake the children and the geese and old Mrs. Lovell in the next cottage.

" No," she said, " not even one! I should think not, indeed."

She was small and looked fragile, but her hair was reddish and electrically curling, and George sulked but obeyed. He cut a heel of bread and spread it with dripping and amber meat-jelly, and sat on the kitchen chair, chewing resentfully and staring at his row of bells, which he thought of (not unnaturally since he had found them and so far paid for them) as his entirely.

Ferring & Son had methods of cleaning that were beyond George's wife's capacity, and the metal had now a sheen like a butterfly's wing. The handles were loops of thick pale leather, undarkened by age and agricultural sweat, and springing erect and resilient. The shape of each bell, engraved with elegant Regency lettering, was as pure and satisfying as twelve perfect notes of music in an ascending scale. George stared, masticated, subsided from anger into a dreamlike contentment; his brain hummed with carols.

Soon his wife wanted to lay breakfast for the morning and turned him out of his place. " And shift they dratted bells out of my way," she said.

George looked round for somewhere to put them. His was not a tidy household, and horizontal surfaces were cluttered with darning, bottles of orange juice, spanners, celluloid dolls, bits of a wireless set. There was a row of hooks along the top of the dresser with cups hanging from them. He cleared them and suspended the bells in careful order.

The cups were part of a blue-and-white service his mother-in-law had given them for a wedding present, so his wife opened her mouth, but when she saw his agonized efforts not to let the bells make a sound, she closed it again, and merely put the cups in a cupboard where no one could knock them over. George relit a half-smoked cigarette while she finished laying the table, and then they went to bed.

When he woke, it was completely dark and silent. Even the cockerels, whose premature dawn was about four in the morning, had not yet started up. He raised his head and peered at the luminous face of his alarm-clock; it said a quarter to three. He was a heavy and solid sleeper and he could not think what had woken him. He lay down again and shut his eyes, and then suddenly he realized what it was.

His bells were ringing.

The sound came faintly through the beams and plaster from the kitchen below. They rang with a kind of muted insistence, separately but at random, every second or less; their ringing had neither tune nor pattern, but it turned him cold. He lay there, chilled and sweating, and listened. Nothing on earth would have got him out of bed and downstairs. His wife slept peacefully and he did not wake her.

He said to himself, " I'm dreaming, that's all. 'Tis the draught," he told himself. " Or the shelf's loose. Or mice."

He stayed rigid in the pitch darkness, straining his ears, and the ringing grew fainter and fainter and at last shivered into silence. He went on listening, but it had stopped; there was only the tick of his clock, and then the noise of the first cockerel, distant over the fields. After some time he convinced himself he'd been dreaming; and soon after that he slept.

When he went to work in the morning he walked still in mid-winter darkness, with fading stars in a cold sky and cat-ice on the mud of the lane. But it was not the same kind of dark; by then he was persuaded it had been imagination, a sort of half-waking nightmare. At breakfast by companionable lamplight,

the coal range crackling, he had gazed at the bells that hung sedately, innocently, from their hooks. He looked at them with perhaps a shade less enthusiasm, but without real suspicion. It must have been a draught. He was thankful he hadn't woken his wife.

That evening when he got home, he noticed that the bells had been taken down and the cups put back. He was about to protest, but realized in time that his mother-in-law was in the scullery with his wife. She was apt to turn up thus unheralded, when someone in her village came over and could give her a lift.

George groaned inaudibly, but saw reason; after all, they were her cups, so to speak. He'd thought of taking the bells round to Albert, but his wife became piqued if he went out while her mother was there, so he stayed at home and fiddled with the wireless he was mending.

By the time his mother-in-law left, it was well after nine, the children were asleep, and he couldn't ring his bells. He took them out of the cupboard where his wife had hidden them, and put them on the dresser and looked at them meditatively. The kitchen was warm and bright, and they shone with a cosy domestic brilliance, reflecting red-gold gleams from the fire. A little defiantly, he lifted down the cups again.

He woke at ten to three and heard the bells ringing. This time he knew he was wide awake. He sat up and pinched himself hard, so painfully that in the morning when he dressed he saw two purple nail-marks on the white skin of his upper arm, above the faded summer tan.

He put out a hand to his wife's shoulder, but did not touch her. It crossed his mind that some people suffered from noises in the head, he forgot why, indigestion or blood pressure or one of those things, but he remembered hearing Mrs. Selby from Mount Cottage complaining about it at a whist drive. "Ringing in my ears," she'd said, "something terrible."

George's hand hovered over his wife, hesitated, retreated; if he woke her she might hear it too. He prayed silently for indigestion or blood pressure. Come to think of it, he didn't feel so good. His heart banged, he was sweating like a pig, his stomach was far from peaceful. He sat shivering intently, and after ten minutes the sound faded and died. He lay down again; but it was nearly an hour before he slept.

Albert was out the following evening when George, looking pale and harassed, delivered the bells to his cottage.

"Albert's gone to a Legion meeting," his wife said. "He left your change for you. He's got a practice fixed up tomorrow

night, for the carols. Half past seven in the church hall. He said to tell you."

George nodded and fidgeted, turned away and came back. He said, " Look, will you ask him to hang they bells up tonight? "

" Hang 'em up where? "

" Any place. Hooks or something. I just—" George withered under Albert's wife's surprise. He said feebly, " I were reading a book about bells. It says while the straps are new they ought to hang."

" Oh, all right," said Albert's wife. " I'll tell him."

Her placid acceptance emboldened George to add more firmly, " It's important."

" I won't forget."

Once in the night George woke up, from disquiet or newly-acquired habit. He waited anxiously and hopefully to see if he had a ringing in his ears, a stomach-ache, or any other encouraging dyspeptic sign, but there was nothing. He felt bothered but perfectly well. Rain dripped from the thatch, his clock ticked, his wife breathed, a goose stirred and cried with previsionary unease in its sleep; that was all. He sighed and turned over.

It was still raining when he went to the practice. He started early, knowing that Albert, a fusser, would be early too. The rain was cold and heavy, and he splashed through it in oilskins and gumboots, arriving to drip in rivulets on the church hall's dusty boards. The peal was arranged on a table at the far end, and Albert was looking through carol-sheets. He said, " What's this about hanging bells up? "

" I got a book from the libery," said George. On church premises, he felt, he should stick as close to the truth as possible, and this, though the book was on repairing wirelesses, was in fact true.

" I never heard tell that, about straps," said Albert disbelievingly.

" There's things as you haven't heard, I dare say. Did you hang 'em up? "

" Can't make head nor tail why us should," said Albert, " but seeing as you was so keen, yes, I did."

" Did you—" said George, and stopped. He shied from a direct question; he knew Albert was a light sleeper, always moaning about they owls and cockerels and Sam Collis's dratted motor bike, and it seemed likely nothing had happened, but he had to know.

He descended to guile, and said, " I were thinking you looked a bit off colour, when I come in."

" Funny," said Albert, " I were just thinking same about you."

George was struck dumb by this. The other four ringers saved him from having to answer; dripping, a little gloomy, not yet fired by Christmas spirit, they came stamping in to be received with a sour glance from Albert and a pointed scrutiny of the clock, which showed two minutes after the half-hour. Oilskins removed and noses blown and the new peal admired, the practice began. " Us'll try 'em out," said Albert, standing at the head of the table. " *First Nowell.*"

George picked up 5 and 6, the ones he always rang. The straps were stiff and unyielding, but he felt the lovely balance of the bells themselves in every muscle of his arms. He smiled with anticipation. The first six notes were purest delight, he caught his breath with pleasure at the sound; his left-hand bell came in at the seventh, and his breath caught once more. So did everyone else's: this time, with horror.

Albert groaned. " Cracked."

" Don't be daft," said George, now breathing hard. " How could it be cracked? Ferring's would have told us, wouldn't they? "

" Try it again."

George tried it again. It made the same sound. He rang his No. 6 bell. It was a caricature of the note above.

Albert gave a sort of moan.

" Let's have a look," said George's neighbour. " 'Tisn't sense, that isn't."

They crowded round the bells, turning them over and over, peering at them; the metal shone in flawless curves. Someone said facetiously, " I reckon you'm out of practice, George."

" I reckon he is that," said George's neighbour, and he picked up the No. 5 bell and tossed out of it a note as exquisite as a blackbird's.

They all laughed, though not quite easily, except George, who went extremely pale. He took up the first six bells one after the other and rang them in turn, and none of them would sound for him more than a metallic croak. The crippled echoes reverberated and died. A total silence fell.

" I know what 'twas," said George at last, hoarse and sweating. " I weren't dreaming. I hung 'em on the dresser and they rang in the night, two nights, just afore three o'clock. I d'know what I done, but they bells got it in for me. That's what."

" Don't talk daft," they said, but they avoided his eyes, stared with apprehension at the table. George's neighbour wiped his forehead.

" They got the devil in 'em," said George.

" That's no way to speak," said Albert. " In a church hall, too," he added mechanically.

" Bells be queer things, all same," a sepulchral voice murmured.

" Not to you," said George. " You can ring 'em. I got no stomach for it." He picked up his oilskins and walked out of the door into the rain. He went into the Lion and drank four pints of beer, refusing darts and conversation, sitting morose and damp in a corner, and later he took himself off in the stormy darkness and strode around the lanes, thinking.

As a result of his thought he asked Copley for an hour off the next morning. He got on somebody else's bicycle and rode over to old Elcombe's place. It was the twentieth of December.

Old Elcombe was splitting wood in his barn, and was not pleased at the interruption. He said sourly, " I reckon Fred Copley don't see much of you, do 'e? "

George, brooding and suspicious, ignored this. He said, " They bells you give me."

" What of 'em? "

" Where'd they come from? "

" Dang it, I telled you that when you come last, didn't I? They been lying around years, I said."

" Who had 'em afore that, I mean? "

" Belonged to Crossley, had the farm till I bought it. Mad on bells, he were, like some other fules I could tell of. Thirty-four years back, that'd be; 'twas thirty-four years come Lady Day us moved in. That all you want? "

" What happened to Crossley? "

" Hanged hisself," said Elcombe succinctly, cleaving a log in half. " From there," he added, and pointed with his axe at the rafters. " Middle of the night, and nobody found he till morning. Danged fule."

" What'd he do it for? "

" Love," said old Elcombe with indescribable cynicism. " Love. 'Twas a girl from over your way, and her jilted him and went and married someone else. I reckon I did know her name—a fancy one, 'twas. Laura; ay, Laura Richards. 'Twere all hushed up, but I heard tell. I d'know who t'other man were."

" I do," said George, as if to himself.

" Who? "

" My dad." George and the farmer looked at each other in the mealy dusk of the barn, under the rafters. The axe hung motionless; his social defences breached by interest, even old Elcombe had stopped work. His eyes narrowed. He said, " What about they bells, then? "

" I just wondered," said George. Already, in the surprise of discovery, he had told too much; he added, improvising rapidly, " There's initials on 'em. I wondered where they used to belong, that's all. Thanks," he said to old Elcombe, and went away to the sound of muffled grousing that died out of earshot; he rode back between the leafless hedges and under the dark, bare trees, with half his time in hand; he needed only do an extra half-hour that evening.

After dark, on his way home, Albert met him in the lane.

Albert said, " I want a word with you, George."

" Well? "

" You got t'other chaps bothered, see. 'Twas silly talk, that was. Bells can't have it in for you; I reckon that's rubbish."

" All right, then," said George, beginning to light up with a kind of angry glitter. " You go on and explain it, let's hear you. I reckon I can listen to reason as well as the next bloke. They bells got cracks in 'em when I touch 'em, that close up when I don't. That it? "

" Now look, George; you got to stop letting it get you down. Flying out's no good. I were thinking," said Albert, illogical but earnest, " how about if us went and had a talk to Vicar? "

" You want to talk to Vicar," said George, " you can talk till you sprout. Far's I'm concerned, 'tis my business. I know where I am now, and I be perishing well going to settle it myself; and that's that."

" How's that, you know where you are? "

" That's my business, too."

" All right," said Albert out of the December dark. " I'm not one of they nosies. All I mean, I'm sorry, George. 'Tis something unaccountable, and you'm a good ringer, as good as us got, and keen, too; and us'll be going out for the carols tomorrow night without you. And I tell you straight, I shut the chaps up, but I can't explain it no more than any of us."

" Maybe I can," said George. " Maybe I can get it fixed. Anyways, I can have a go. Thanks, Albert," he said, his breath a faint pallor in the night, for it was turning colder. " So long."

At half past two in the morning George rode like a shadow down the lane. He had taken his bike out of the woodshed after tea and pumped up its tires and left it propped against the wall behind a laurustinus bush. His wife slept. If she did wake, she would think he'd gone down to see if any spivs from town were after the geese, a sortie that all the village wives were used to in the weeks before Christmas; and for this reason he did not mind the scuffles and honks that echoed over the hedge as he left.

Everything else he minded very much. He minded the cold which made him gasp after his warm bed, the idea of meeting Tover, the village constable, who was quite likely on the prowl for poultry-thieves, the thought of having to explain where he was going—and most of all, he minded the prospect of getting there. He wore a scarf, a cap, a thick old leather jacket, and he rode hard, but his teeth chattered.

There was a moon in the clear sky, and the trees and hedges were white with rime; the yellow circle of his lamp wavered, unnecessary, over the lane's surface. He reached old Elcombe's place and leaned his bicycle against the gate. Distant, the church clock struck a quarter to three.

George had in some ways a gentle nature, but an obstinate one. He knew that what he was doing was enough to make most people think him off his head, but it was his idea, his conviction of the right thing to do, and he was determined to try it. He wasn't going to be got the better of by a set of bells, not without a fight, anyway. He clenched his teeth to silence them and walked on rubber soles across the midden to the barn.

The small door cut into the two big ones was unlocked. He opened it carefully, looked over his shoulder at the deserted yard; the house, visible black and sleeping from the gate, was hidden; no dog barked. He shut himself into the barn.

Inside, the darkness was absolute; rats rustled and scurried to the far end, but George was used to rats and had more important matters on his mind; he wiped the sleeve of his jacket across his forehead and stood there blindly, turning his face to the unseen rafters, and then he began to speak. At first his voice was hoarse and cracked, but after a little while he grew accustomed to the sound and he spoke quietly and evenly.

He said, " Look, Mr. Crossley, it's about they bells. Mr. Elcombe give them to me, but I reckon you know what's the matter. They took agin me on account of they were yours, and what happened with my mother. Mr. Crossley, I'm sorry you had that trouble, like, but it weren't my fault. I weren't even born. She'm been dead a long time, since I were a baby, nearly as long as you, and my dad as well.

" 'Tis reasonable you not wanting me to come here and take your bells away, but I reckon if you was that fond of 'em, you didn't like 'em lying around getting lost, neither, and mouldering, like. Us done your bells up proper, Mr. Crossley, so's they can ring again, the way bells ought to be used, and I reckon you should be glad of that. You think it over, Mr. Crossley, and you'll see it weren't my fault I were born; and if I hadn't been, who'd have mended they bells for you? "

George stood and looked up at the rafters that his eyes could not distinguish, and listened to the stillness. The rats had subsided; nothing stirred. He felt warmer, relaxed, and peaceful.

He stayed there for a minute, without moving, and then let himself out of the door and walked across the crisped mud of the yard to where his bicycle waited at the gate.

The Lion had put up its Christmas decorations, and between the red curtains of the bar, George peered into a sparkle of coloured lights, paper chains looped from the beams, a wreath of holly round the clock. Half a dozen people were inside, sitting round the fire, but not the ringers, who usually warmed up—except Albert—with a pint before they started.

Under the lamp outside, its wrought-iron bracket twined with mistletoe, he hesitated, and then he heard the peal ring out along the street. As he came round the corner he saw the ringers standing in a circle outside Mill Cottages, a lantern on the ground in the middle, the bells glinting as they rose and fell.

Young Collis, with an agonized face, was ringing 5 and 6. In the frosty air the sound was sharp and clear as ice, the ringers' breath a cloud round their heads. George lurked till *Good King Wenceslas* was over, and bore down on young Collis like fate. He said, " I'll take they." The circle broke and gaped.

Albert said, " Look here, George . . ."

" 'Tis all right; you'll see," George said with absolute conviction. " What's us doing next? "

" *Nowell*," said Albert uncertainly.

" Come on, then."

With an anxious tremor, the first notes started up, and out of the corner of his eye, as his bells came in, strong and perfect, George saw the ringers turn their heads in amazement. He let out his breath like a trumpet, and grinned; winked at Albert; stood, warm and delighted, taking his place in the pattern.

Out of the cottage doors light streamed over the hoary grass, people emerged and listened and called, " Merry Christmas! " at the end, and when no one was looking, George's lips moved.

" Merry Christmas, Mr. Crossley," he said to himself, and swinging the bells in one hand, he went with Albert to pass the collecting-box round.

JOHN KRUSE—EDGAR MITTELHOLZER
EDITH PARGETER—ROBERT STANDISH
in next month's ARGOSY

COURT MARTIAL

His orders had suddenly appeared monstrously evil

by CHARLES C. O'CONNELL

HE stood pallid and tense before the officers. Though he was now unarmed and shorn of all his field equipment, his tunic seemed to drag heavily on his shoulders, and the weight of his helmet was almost unbearable; he could hardly keep his head erect. His right arm which had been twisted viciously behind his back hung limply by his side, numb and lifeless, except for the faint pulse that beat under his arm-pit.

He stood with his feet apart, although years of discipline urged him to stand to attention, but he knew that if he did so he would topple over. In fact, it made no difference how he presented himself; the verdict of the court martial would be "guilty." He had disobeyed orders. Only his own conscience could justify his action. According to their code, he was a rebel . . . Well, let it be. If he had to relive the episode, he would do exactly the same thing.

The heat inside the tent was intolerable. He longed to step back a little into the current of air that moved the canvas by the door, yet he dared not. Such an action might antagonize his judges even more, and although he could see no vestige of mercy or even humanity in their stern faces, he had hope that perhaps, in spite of everything, they would understand.

"You have heard the evidence." The voice of his superior officer jarred on his ears. "Have you anything to say?"

The prisoner thought for a moment. Had he anything to say in his defence? No, he had not—nothing that they could understand. But what could he not say of this useless bloodshed, which was for assassins rather than soldiers! This war on women and innocent children was repugnant to him. Nothing, he thought, could justify this mass murder, yet to say so here would be treason.

"Answer!" snarled the officer.

"I have nothing to say."

"Do you deny that you allowed those refugees through?"

Perhaps it would be better if he said something—anything to shorten the farcical trial. "I let them through," he said hoarsely, admitting the charge for the first time.

The officer smiled. "Against your specific orders?"

"Yes."

Why in the name of glory did they persist in this mockery?

The two officers held a whispered consultation. One of the guards behind the prisoner shuffled for an instant and was still again. Then the second officer spoke. His was a soft face with none of the harsh lines of his superior, but his eyes were colder than a winter dawn.

"We should be interested to know why you allowed all three to go. Had you done your duty by one, there would have been no further trouble. Were they friends of yours? Did you know them? Or were you tempted by the amount of the bribe?"

The prisoner shook his head, and the perspiration temporarily held by his eyebrows trickled to his chin. "They offered no bribe, sir. I did not know them."

"Then why did you let them through?"

"I thought it was—just."

"What do you know of justice?" the officer sneered.

The prisoner closed his eyes. Once again the picture of those three weary travellers came to his mind. They were fleeing from a terror which he represented. He had not harmed them because they looked so desperately tired, or perhaps it had been that heart-searching appeal in the young woman's eyes, or perhaps it was because of the child, so helpless in a world gone mad . . . Whatever the reason, his orders had suddenly appeared monstrously evil.

He opened his eyes. "I am a soldier," he said firmly. "I will not become an assassin."

And then the guard behind him struck him at the base of the neck and he slumped to the ground. He was vaguely conscious of being kicked, but it did not hurt any more. A strange sense of unreality possessed him, as though he existed only in a dream.

Some time later, he found himself on his feet again. The business of the court had finished. There had been no death sentence. One of the officers merely nodded his head to the guard, and the prisoner was propelled towards the door.

He staggered as he came into the sunlight, and his helmet fell off. Nobody picked it up—he would have no further use for it. The cool air stirring through his matted hair was as invigorating as wine. He was rushed forward and then, some paces from the tent, behind a high, screening boulder, his guards stopped.

The prisoner was under no illusion. He knew that in a few moments he would be dead. Yet he had no regrets. Perhaps it would be better to leave this world of injustice and suffering.

Vaguely, he wondered if it would always be like this. That could hardly be possible. Men must one day realize the futility of bloodshed. Perhaps, in a thousand or two thousand years, men would have at last learnt to live in peace and there would be no greed, nor wars, nor murder.

He stood erect. He did not feel afraid. He was filled with a strange, new hope. He thought of those three travel-stained refugees. He hoped they got through to Egypt. Once there, the child would be safe from Herod's barbarous assassins . . .

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS to THIRTY DAYS HATH SEPTEMBER
on page 14

1. *February: " Valentine's Day," from " Essays of Elia," by Charles Lamb.*
2. *December: " The Raven," by Edgar Allan Poe.*
3. *April: The Prologue to " The Canterbury Tales," by Geoffrey Chaucer.*
4. *July: " Don Juan," by Lord Byron.*
5. *August: the same.*
6. *November: " The Night the Ghost Got In," by James Thurber.*
7. *January: " The Eve of St. Agnes," by John Keats.*
8. *June: " The Young Visiters," by Daisy Ashford.*
9. *October: " The Shepheardes Calender," by Edmund Spenser.*
10. *September: " Barbara Frietchie," by John Greenleaf Whittier.*
11. *May: " Song on May Morning," by John Milton.*
12. *March: " Written in March," by William Wordsworth.*

IN NEXT MONTH'S ARGOSY

CHRISTOPHER LANDON'S EXCITING NEW NOVEL

" HORNETS' NEST "

★

RAY BRADBURY

PAUL GALLICO

PRIZE CROSSWORD

The Third Part of

CAPTAIN LIGHTFOOT

★ ★ by W. R. BURNETT ★ ★

" CAPTAIN," said Big Tom, " you are being watched. There's trouble; trouble in the back country, even in Dublin. Dragoons were stoned along the quays last night."

" What has that to do with me? " Michael asked brusquely.

" You're a member of the ' Five Minus One,' Captain. I'm a member, and the Castle has hired a new flock of spies, some from the Liverpool Irish. And that's why I'm here to warn you. We have a rumour that Clagett has crossed over with a bravo of the name of Villona, a real murderous fellow . . ."

" Clagett, is it? " cried Michael, bristling, remembering Doherty's words.

" It's only a rumour as yet," said Big Tom, " but he's the shrewdest and slipperiest of informers, and the Castle's used him many times when the troubles got bad. He must have expected great difficulty or he wouldn't have brought Villona with him. Villona would cut Clagett's throat for a guinea or two. I've got Tuer O'Brien and Willie the Goat searching the stews for word of him. And now I must go. Good night, Captain."

It was only a few nights later, about eleven o'clock and raining very hard, when Michael was called to the card-room because of visitors. As he opened the door, a slim little dark-haired man raised himself up awkwardly from behind a table loaded with food.

" Brady! " shouted Michael. " What in heaven's name . . .! " And he hurried round the table, grabbed the little man in his arms, and almost suffocated him with his embraces.

Aloysius Brady, the quiet little harness-maker from Ballymoure! A solid man! Noticing an odd, sly expression on Brady's face, he turned . . . and there, large as life, was his old friend, Tim Keenan, grinning all over his loutish face, his straw-coloured hair on end as usual, and a good familiar smell of home-made Ballymoure whisky about him.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Michael Martin, a wild young Irishman, plays a dangerous prank when, in 1817, *he holds up Lord Devereaux's factor, Angus Desmond, intending to distribute his rent money among the poorer members of the "Five Minus One," a Leinster secret society. The leader, Regis Donnell, expels him. Wanted for the capital offence of highway robbery, Michael leaves Ballymoure—and Catherine O'Herlihy, the black-haired village beauty whose affections had till now seemed equally divided between the sober Regis and the reckless Michael. On his way, he falls in with the famous gentleman of the road, Captain Doherty, who takes Michael to Nine Steps, the thieves' kitchen of Dublin, where Big Tom and Mahony stand guard. There he grooms Michael for the part of Captain Lightfoot, and introduces him to Lady Anne More, who runs the Mansion, Doherty's gambling-house. Michael also meets Doherty's natural daughter, Araminta McDonald, whose provocative beauty and lively ways attract him strongly.*

In avenging himself on the trouble-making Sir George Bracey, Doherty pays heavily for his success, and dies from his wounds. Michael then takes over, assisted by Lady Anne, and by Trim, Doherty's faithful servant. After a duel, in which his treacherous rival, Captain Hood, proves to be a coward, Michael becomes the acknowledged leader of underworld and aristocracy alike—as feared by Clagett the informer as he is respected by the Lords Clayton and Clonmel.

In this exciting world Michael forgets his love for Catherine, and marries the gay and giddy young Ara. Gradually a slight rift grows between them. Meanwhile Dublin Castle shows a sinister interest in Michael's affairs. As the Third (and last) Part opens, urgent warning of trouble is brought by Big Tom . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Brady got down to business and said, "Mick, we need money."

"Good," said Michael. "How much?"

Tim lowered his head and held his hands over his ears as Brady replied: "We are hard pressed. 'Five Minus One' needs two hundred guineas."

Without a word, Michael rose, took the amount from a drawer in the cabinet, and handed it to Brady, who tucked it away with a bow, and Tim stared, open-mouthed again, at Michael, and his awe returned, and he could not bring himself to say a word.

A wave of melancholy swept over Michael and he fell to thinking of Ballymoure.

"We must leave at once," said Brady quickly. "Take advantage

of the night. We'll be well on our way by dawn." They drank a toast to Ireland, and then they shook hands, and slapped backs profusely at the door.

" And Catherine's all right? " asked Michael hurriedly.

" Ay, ay," said Brady quickly, and rather furtively, Michael thought, and he wanted to detain them, but they got away from him, and he stood looking after them until they had disappeared round to the back of the Mansion.

" There is something wrong at Ballymoure," Michael told himself. " *Something very wrong.*"

At two o'clock he took Lady Anne aside: " Anne, we're closing tonight. I've got business to look after."

" And it's about time," she was going to say, but thought better of it, fearing that such a statement might change Michael's mind, as his perverseness was growing more noticeable every day. " Very well," she said indifferently " Just as you say, Michael. DeLane will tell the staff."

" Ay," said Michael absent-mindedly.

Lady Anne went home first, Michael staying to make a final check with DeLane. When Michael got home, Ara was waiting for him, beautifully dressed and smiling.

What he did not know was that Lady Anne had primed Ara, and though it was a great wrench to her, Ara did not oppose Michael in his plan to go away for a few days; in fact, she seemed rather indifferent. As Michael fell wearily into bed, he said to himself: " Ah, it's time I got away from this prison for a while, not that anybody cares! "

No, Ara did not oppose him, but she cried into her pillow after he had fallen asleep, and she knew in her heart that this was the end of the first phase of their relationship. What the second phase would be she was unable to guess, and the uncertainty upset her so that she couldn't sleep all night and only pretended to sleep for fear Mick might wake and wonder what was wrong.

But Michael found a great amount of opposition from another source: Big Tom. " Begging your pardon, Captain," he said, in the presence of Trim, who would not commit himself, " this is the wrong time to leave Dublin. You're safe here. The Angus Desmond business is still a local matter, and with all the trouble in Kilkenny it will no doubt remain so. What—go to Ballymoure? It's like putting your head in the lion's mouth."

But Michael, pacing impatiently, would not listen. " There's something I've got to find out," he insisted stubbornly, " and the only way I can find it out is by going back to Ballymoure. It's not as if I was going to stay. for heaven's sake! I'll be in and out in one night."

" If you must go," said Big Tom, " be guided by me. Two men riding cross-country at the present time will attract a lot of attention, particularly two men on thoroughbreds. You must go by coach. I'll supply the boot, the driver, and the coach. Let Trim ride as postilion, and use the two thoroughbreds for lead horses

You ride in the coach, Captain. You are a lawyer, going to Waterford. Dress plainly. I doubt anybody will bother such an equipage. Travel the Dublin road openly. If there's trouble, it is no problem to unharness the thoroughbreds, and that will leave an innocent four-horse coach with two accredited liverymen."

"Done," cried Michael curtly, and both Big Tom and Trim heaved sighs of relief.

"I should be back in a week," said Michael, feeling more than a little awkward with Ara, who, very much upset, was overdoing her attitude of indifference.

"Oh?" said Ara. "It's not much of a trip, then."

"No, nothing at all. A mere jaunt."

But Ara was remembering "mere jaunts" of Doherty's that had extended to months and almost a year.

"Just a week, you say?" she inquired as if making conversation to fill in a gap of silence. Actually, she wanted to weep and fling herself into his arms and beg him not to go, or, if he must, to take her with him.

"Two at most," said Michael, who was finding it much more difficult to leave Ara than he had thought. But on the other hand, the girl seemed to make nothing of the parting at all. It was as if he were setting out for the Mansion of an evening, as he'd done for so many months.

"Well . . ." he said vaguely; then he bent down and patted Princey on the head. At least the little white fellow seemed distressed.

"Well," said Ara, wishing he would go at once so she wouldn't break down and cry and make a bothersome fool of herself. "We . . . we've never been apart before, Mick," she couldn't help saying. "Not even for one night. It will seem strange."

"Yes," said Michael, glancing at her hopefully. "Very strange."

"But then," said Ara hurriedly, "it will probably be good for us. I . . . I sometimes think perhaps we were seeing too much of each other . . ."

"Yes," said Michael, freezing. "You are probably right. Now I should go."

They stood looking at each other for a moment, and during the silence Princey got up on his hind legs and did his only trick, walking about with awkward little hops, trying to get them to pay some attention to him.

"Well," said Michael, and he leaned forward and kissed Ara on the cheek, then the mouth.

Her lips were cool and unresponsive.

"Well," said Michael again, drawing back; then he turned quickly and went out, slamming the door.

Ara stared at the door for a long time, struggling for control, then she picked up Princey and ran with him to her room, where she locked the door, burst out into wild sobs, and flung herself across the bed.

It was almost night—gloaming, you might say—with lights in the farm windows and a heavy stillness over the countryside when Michael, now riding up ahead with Trim on the thoroughbreds, guided the coach to the old ruined monastery a short distance from Ballymoure.

The owls were hooting mournfully in among the great fallen moss-covered stones, and the bluish will-o'-the-wisp was flicking across the dark bog just beyond, and Bennett, the driver, and Moore, the boot, city men both, looked about them uneasily at this obviously haunted spot, and crossed themselves, muttering.

They drew the coach back inside the shelter of a standing wall, and then the horses were fed and watered, and finally the men sat down to eat the food they'd brought with them.

At a little after eight, Bennett saddled Michael's horse, and Michael mounted and talked to Trim, who stood at the horse's head.

" Be saddled and ready, Trim. We'll be leaving as soon as I'm through, which shouldn't be long. If there is a change in my plan, I'll let you know right away. I'd put the horses to the coach now, and have the boys ready."

" Yes, sir," said Trim. " We'll be ready."

Michael rode off in the darkness with a gesture of au revoir.

Michael dismounted in the O'Herlihy yard and then led his horse round to the back of the house. All the lights were out—and his heart was pounding loudly. But where was Buffer, their watch-dog? He looked about him for a long time, and listened. But there wasn't a sound in the night.

Picking up a handful of pebbles, he tossed them at Catherine's window, then he waited. Far off now, he could hear the jug-jug-jug of the frogs and the whirring of insects in the grass. And then his heart almost stopped beating as a white form appeared at the window and a blurred white face peered out into the night.

Catherine!

He put his face close to the window and tapped on it with his forefinger. It was Catherine, all right; he could see that lovely forehead and the dark hair in braids as before. But she shrank away in horror and waved violently for him to go away. Michael couldn't understand this, and kept tapping gently and gesturing for her to raise the window. She seemed to be crying now, and she kept motioning for him to go away.

Then Michael heard a dog barking some distance off in the direction of the cowsheds, and soon all was confusion as the front door opened and slammed, and Buffer came rushing at him across the grass.

Buffer stopped suddenly and began to sniff.

" Buffer, Buffer, old boy," called Michael. A dim gleam of candlelight showed somewhere in the O'Herlihy house, and Michael wondered with a curse if old John was going to turn out with the blunderbuss. And at that moment the window was

banged up, and Michael saw that there was a man inside Catherine's room and it wasn't her father, nor yet one of her brothers—and then he started back and stared. Regis Donnell!

" Go away, Martin," cried Regis angrily. " Go away."

Martin, was it? What was this cold formality all of a sudden? And why the devil was Regis Donnell in Catherine's bedroom, and her in her nightdress?

" What in God's name are you doing here, Regis? " he cried.

" I'm where I belong. Mind your own affairs, you meddler, and go back to Dublin and leave us in peace."

" Catherine, Catherine," called Michael, all at sea. " Where are you? What's going on? "

Catherine appeared for a moment beside Regis, a vague white figure. " Go away, Mick. It's a secret. Please, for my sake, go away! "

And then Regis blurted out angrily: " We're married, man! And I'm hiding here—and that's the secret, and now are you satisfied, you swaggering Dublin bravo? "

Michael was stunned, then angry. " Dublin bravo, is it? A low fellow not up to your mark, eh? All right, then, why do you take my money? "

" What money, you ass? " shouted Regis.

" Why, the two hundred guineas I gave to Brady. Two hundred guineas, Regis Donnell. That's a lot of gold."

There was a blank silence, then: " Ah, Brady," said Regis in distress. " I thought his collecting was a bit on the easy side."

There was another long silence, then Michael called out: " Are you happy, girl? "

And Catherine's voice came from the darkness: " Yes, I'm happy, Mick. Very happy." All the same, it sounded to him as if she was crying.

" I owe you an apology, Martin," said Regis quietly. " Yes, I apologize. Good lord, where did you get two hundred guineas? "

Michael laughed contemptuously. " Two hundred guineas, is it? I could put my hand on ten thousand if you need it. But you wouldn't take my money, would you, Regis? It's not good money. You'd rather take it from a tenant farmer or a shoemaker or maybe a poor tinker, wandering the roads."

" Mick! " Catherine protested from the darkness.

" Oh, you're a stiff-necked fellow," Michael went on. " It's all principle with you, if you hang for it; you and the others. And what of those you're fighting? Are your enemies so high-principled, then? You know the answer. But you'd rather go down to defeat and keep your soul clean and to hell with everybody else."

" Yes, Mick, I would," said Regis quietly.

" And he's right," called Catherine from the darkness.

Michael put back his head and laughed loudly. " Oh, to the devil with all of you! " he said vehemently. " I'm going back to Dublin. That's where I belong. And not with the likes of the two-shilling lot of you. Good-bye, now."

He turned, mounted his horse, and rode off towards the orchard and a short cut he knew back to the monastery.

Michael felt a sudden presentiment of evil as he rode back towards the monastery, skirting the northern edges of the great bog. There was a marked hush over the whole countryside, a sort of waiting stillness that bothered Michael to such an extent that he took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

Ah, well! It was a difficult thing to say good-bye to your birthplace for ever, and to Catherine—gone, gone . . . a worried woman now, and no longer the laughing, teasing girl he remembered. She belonged to Regis and had taken his problems on her slender shoulders. Catherine, good-bye!

And as he rode along, he began to hum the *Bride of Mourne*, and then suddenly he stopped humming, remembering all at once Ara, Lady Anne, Princey, the comfortable home in Dublin . . . the thousands of guineas in the strong-box . . . Lord Clayton, Clonmel, and the dancing and gaming and merriment . . .

And so he took off his hat and bowed in the direction of shadowy Ballymoure, sleeping its nightly sleep—all dark except for Jimmie O'Hare's lamp at the corner and the pleasant yellow glow from the windows of the Bonnie Prince Charlie—and into the darkness he called: "Good-bye, all. It's Mick Martin speaking, and I'm going back where I belong."

And then suddenly a pistol was fired beyond the monastery, and Michael saw a faint red glow in the night, and without pausing to reflect, he leapt his horse into a gallop and rode off at right angles to his former course, skirting the back of the monastery and avoiding the bog by skilful riding in a district familiar to him since childhood. No one could follow here, and yet almost at once he heard some fools on horseback plunging after him, and then cries of dismay and the soggy sound of a horse falling on the treacherous soft ground, and then more cries and clanking, and suddenly a ragged volley was fired after him, and Michael felt a sledge-hammer blow in the back part of his right thigh and nearly fell from his horse.

"Hit like Doherty, damn it," he cried, and then he spurred his horse into a wild gallop, took a low hedge cleanly, and was free at last on the far side of the monastery in open flat country which stretched for miles, sloping easily down towards the Dublin road.

And now, over the tall trees to the eastward, the moon rose, big and white, and far away across the flat meadowland Michael could make out a lone horseman riding all out in his own direction and along a parallel course. Was it to head him off?

He leaned forward over his horse's neck and talked to him, urging him on, trying to outdistance the rider far to his left, but his endeavours were useless; the other horseman kept his place, and finally Michael said to himself: "And what the devil kind of horse is the fellow riding!" and then a thought struck him. Trim! It must be Trim on the big roan hunter, a devil for eating up distance even with a man of Doherty's fourteen stone on his back.

Drawing his left-hand pistol, he veered off towards the other

horseman and little by little got close to him, and finally the man rose in his saddle and waved one arm violently. Trim! By the grace of God!

And then shortly they were riding side by side across the meadow and Michael's spirits had risen to fever pitch in spite of the painful throbbing of his leg, and when they took a tall hedge without a bobble, he yelled loudly and waved his hat.

And now they settled down to the long pull, leaning over their horses like jockeys in a terrible, whipping, kicking Derby finish, and the countryside rolled away from them like a huge saucer while the big white moon went effortlessly along, peering, showing the features of its great face, placidly amused; and at last Trim shouted in a lusty voice completely foreign to his normal everyday self: " We've lost 'em! We've lost 'em! "

And, wildly exhilarated, Michael stood up in his stirrups and shouted.

And Trim stared blankly into the semi-darkness. Was it Doherty himself come back?

They were riding at a walk now, following the line of a tall hedge which screened them from the Dublin road.

" You saved me with that pistol shot, Trim. I would have walked right into their arms."

" Ay," said Trim calmly. " As soon as you left, I had a feeling—I don't know what. So I sent the boys back to Dublin with the coach, then I hid out beyond the old buildings—glad to get away from that creepy place—and then I heard them coming."

Michael groaned. " I have a ball in the thigh, Trim, but it was spent when it hit me, and it's not much bother."

" Let's get it out."

" No. Dublin will be soon enough. Doherty had one in his calf for weeks. I took it out for him at last one night at an inn. He was dancing a jig, and it hurt him."

Trim nodded slowly and smiled. " Ah, Doherty! "

At eight of the clock the next morning, they were moving easily along a back road which ran roughly parallel to the Dublin road. It was a grey day with low, dark clouds and a threat of rain in the air. They had stopped, supped, and rested just before dawn, and the horses now seemed in good shape and ready for the journey ahead.

And so the morning and afternoon passed. And finally, when for the first time that day, the sun showed itself low in the western sky, they turned south along the reedy bank of a stream until finally the mountains had been swallowed by the descending night—and then, all at once, it seemed to Michael that there had been a tremendous explosion, not so much of sound as of concussion, and he found himself sailing through the air, and then he landed with a crash on the back of his neck and lay stunned.

Trim had torn past him and was having a hard time pulling up his mount. Michael rolled his head from side to side, trying to

clear it. Not ten feet away he could hear the faint liquid murmuring of the stream; and then his eyes began to clear, and towards his left, he saw his mount rising from the spill, and the mount seemed as stunned as himself and stood stock-still for a moment, then hobbled towards him on three legs.

"Ah," cried Michael, "I hope the poor devil has not broken a leg."

"Whoa! Whoa!" cried Trim as he pulled up his lathered horse and dismounted.

Michael was rising now. Trim glanced at him, then went over to examine Michael's mount.

"How is he, Trim?" called Michael, wincing away from the thought of that lovely black horse being finished off with a pistol.

"No bones broken," cried Trim, "but he's wrenched himself badly, and he's through for the journey. Stepped in a hole, likely."

"What luck!" groaned Michael, and then all at once he remembered Doherty's "Fortune, thou bitch!" and smiled sadly—ah well, that was the way of it, and no one knew it better than Doherty. An exposed root, a sudden movement of the arm with the blunderbuss nails flying, an innocent hole in the ground—and there you were. Fate, accident, predestination—who knew?

"Captain," said Trim, "we'd better swim the river and swop this horse for a sound one on the far side. The patrols are out tonight, probably all over the countryside."

"No," said Michael, "I intend to get the black horse back to Dublin. He saved me in the north with Doherty, and he brought me safe home from Belfast. We'll swim them over, if you like, but we'll not abandon this horse."

A foolish sentiment, no doubt; but it suited Trim completely. "Ay. Then what do we do, Captain?"

"It's me they want, Trim; not you," said Michael. "We'll swim the river, then you walk the horses into that big town where we saw the lights and rest them up—as long as you like. Get the black into Dublin. I know a trick or two. I'll get in all right. I wasn't with Doherty all that time for nothing."

Trim thought this over for a while, then he said: "Not a bad plan, Captain. The truth is, it's better for us to separate. But why don't you take the roan? And I'll walk the black in and rest him."

"No," said Michael. "I'm better off without a thoroughbred at this point. I'll get in safe and sound. Don't worry."

The river was shallow, and they had only one bit of trouble crossing it, and that in midstream when the roan balked at the swiftness and pull of the current and wanted to go back; but Michael cut at him hard with the whip and yelled at him ferociously and finally got him moving forward.

They said good-bye on the far bank. Michael gave Trim his sword and retained two pistols and some ammunition.

"See you at Nine Steps, Trim," called Michael.

"Ay, Captain, and good luck to you, sir," called Trim.

But it was not quite as simple as Michael imagined it would be. Long before dawn he was as lame as the black horse had been, and ached all over as if he'd been beaten with clubs ; and finally he fell down on a bank in the darkness and lay panting and unable to continue.

He fought hard against sleep, but at last it overcame him, and it was more like coma than true sleep, and he did not wake until the sun was shining in his face.

He sat up with a start. There was a thicket just beyond him, and he saw eyes peering through the brush, regarding him as a hawk regards a rabbit. And then he looked down at his mud-covered gentleman's clothes, and he noticed that his pistols and his ammunition were gone, and then he grabbed for his purse and found that it had disappeared also.

He looked at the thicket again and heard a jeering laugh, and then a big rough head was thrust out at him and he saw that it was the head of a huge man in old, patched country clothes. The man had a thatch of thick, curly black hair, and his fat, rugged face was almost as dark as an Italian's.

He jeered at Michael and showed the pistols he was holding in his huge, hairy hands.

Michael was almost bursting with rage. " Who the devil are you? " he shouted belligerently.

And the man jeered back: " Who the devil are you? "

Michael glanced up above him, where there seemed to be a road of some kind. And then before he could speak, a strange look came over the man's face and he seemed to be listening, and all at once he ducked back into the thicket, and Michael felt a vibration along the ground, and then he heard the noise of a cavalcade, and in a moment he caught the flash of a helmet, and with a sudden twist of his body he rolled into a little hollow which was screened from the road by a low bush.

A score of dragoons thundered past overhead, and when the hoofbeats had died away, the big shaggy man came out from his hiding-place and stood staring strangely at Michael. " Lobsters, they was," called the man. " Why didn't you cry out? "

Michael had a sudden thought and called back, " How many buttons on your coat? "

To Michael's surprise, the man leapt into the air and gave a loud shout, then he bellowed: " Why, five minus one, sir! "

And then, laughing, he came up to Michael and handed back his pistols and his purse. " I took you for a lord, sir," he said, touching his cap respectfully.

" What's your name? "

" Kevin White—and they call me Kev, and sometimes the Black One because of my complexion."

" Did you ever hear of Captain Martin? "

" I did, sir. The one who is in Dublin, and is friend with the quality, and is taking money off them. We've all heard of late."

Michael took two guineas out of his purse and handed them to

Kevin, whose eyes were growing bigger and bigger. "Yes, sir, and thank you, sir," he said, taking the guineas and bowing. "And what can I do for you, sir?"

"Where do you live?"

"Not more than a quarter of a mile back beyond those trees. I have a shack of my own, though it's not much. I was working at the Hall till the trouble. I've been discharged. Will you honour me by coming?"

Michael was a sick man, and the knowledge of it irked him so that he wanted to curse his fate and damn his luck, but did neither and contented himself with sitting in front of Kevin White's small peat fire, wrapped in a blanket, sipping hot grog. His head pounded and thumped, and his swollen right thigh was as sore and bothersome as if it had been covered with boils.

Remembering Doherty's wound, Michael had forced the Black One to cut the ball from his thigh, and it had been a long, tedious, painful procedure.

At last it was out, and the bleeding stanched, and then Michael fainted, and the Black One's big, ungainly, black-haired daughter put him to bed and looked after him with a mixture of familiarity and awe which kept her alternately flushing and paling. The Captain was such a lovely young man, with his blue-black hair and his white skin! Perhaps he would be very ill indeed and stay with them for months!

But Michael had risen from the bed as soon as he'd come round, in spite of the protests of Kevin and his daughter. "I've got no time to be lying in bed," cried Michael irritably. "I've to get back to Dublin at once."

"Easy, man, easy," said Kevin. "I'll get you back, but there is no sense in fainting dead on the way. You must rest."

And so Michael was trying to rest, sitting by the fire, sipping his grog, while Kevin was away somewhere and his big daughter, Maureen, puttered about in the cabin, too timid to make conversation with the great Captain from Dublin, but moving near to him from time to time, hoping he'd notice her.

Towards evening, Kevin came rushing in, slamming the door, making a great breeze and to-do in the cabin. Michael, still at the fire, wrapped in a blanket, turned to look at him.

"Captain," cried Kevin, violently agitated, "it's a disaster, a great disaster."

"What? What?"

"It's all over the countryside, Captain." Kevin was almost incoherent with excitement and shock.

"What is all over the countryside, man? Don't yell. Explain."

"They've taken him. They've taken him."

Michael jumped up impatiently, but his right leg buckled and he just barely saved himself from falling by grasping the back of the chair.

He roared: "Taken who, for the love of heaven?"

"Why, the Leader. The Lobsters have taken him."

Michael of a sudden felt cold as ice. "They've taken Regis Donnell?"

"Ay," cried Kevin. "They've taken him, and he's on his way to Dublin Castle and hanging. It's high treason he's wanted for."

And so Michael rode back to Dublin on a battered old cart with Kevin and Maureen. He was dressed in patched country clothes provided by Kevin, his hair was tousled, his face dirty, and the few who noticed him at all saw no difference between him and the other two in the cart, except that the son was much paler than the father or daughter.

They deposited him in the courtyard at Nine Steps at two o'clock of a misty, rainy morning, and at last Maureen had the courage to kiss him on the mouth and say: "Good luck, Captain. Good luck. I'll pray for you." And Michael returned the kiss and gave her a long hug, and Kevin said with a sigh: "The poor girl will remember that to her dying day."

Big Tom, with the help of Trim and two of the ostlers, carried Michael to the Fort and made him comfortable.

The Fort was Big Tom's best hide-out, exclusively for important, badly wanted men. It was entered through an innocent-looking, disused smoke-house, off the courtyard. In the back of the smoke-house wall was a small, hidden wooden door; this opened into a large, low-ceiled, comfortable room with two beds, a big table, and many chairs. Best of all, there was a secret exit which led down through the cellars of Nine Steps, where there was a warren of basement rooms and wine-cellars and store-rooms, a bewildering labyrinth for the uninitiated.

Later, after some soup and grog, he felt better, and Trim sat down with him for a conference.

"So they've taken Regis Donnell?"

Trim nodded slowly. "We walked right into it, sir. 'Twas bad luck."

"Oh no," cried Michael. "We did not walk right into it. We brought it on, Trim. I led them right to him, and it was all the damnedest black-hearted accident, just because I wanted to see . . . but never mind that. What else?"

"The apartment is being watched night and day. Miss Ara has been warned to do nothing. But she's frantic, Captain."

"Warned how?"

"I had a note slipped to the butcher, who gave it to Mary when she was marketing. It was risky, but I had to do it, Captain. No telling what Miss Ara might do."

"I can't stay here for ever," shouted Michael impatiently, rising from the bed.

Trim studied Michael's face shrewdly, then he lowered his eyes and said: "Doherty was a great one for lying low at the right time. That's how he carried on to forty. Twenty years of such a life without a moment in prison is somewhat in the nature of a record. It was all from lying low at the right time."

Michael lay back and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. After a while he fell into a deep sleep, and Trim tiptoed out.

The next afternoon, Michael was surprised to hear a tapping at the smoke-house door. He drew out a pistol from under his pillow and lay waiting; but finally he heard Big Tom's voice, very low: "Are you asleep, Captain? Are you asleep?"

Michael called impatiently: "Come in. Come in, man."

The door opened, and Big Tom looked in. "Captain, do you feel up to hearing great news and speaking a word to Mahony and his lads?"

"Yes," cried Michael, perking up at once.

And then Big Tom entered, followed by Mahony, and two of his henchmen, Tuer O'Brien, and Willie the Goat. They had all been drinking, and their eyes were blazing with triumph.

"We heard the sad word," said Mahony, "that young Donnell has been taken. But he's avenged already, and so is Doherty—and you yourself, Captain. Clagett has been directing the informers, and they say that he alone is responsible for the taking of Donnell. Well . . . Clagett is no more."

Tuer O'Brien and Willie the Goat cheered savagely, and Willie did a few wild dance-steps like primitive man celebrating a great triumph over his enemies.

"What?" cried Michael, sitting up and staring at them.

"He died of fright, the little rat," said Mahony, "while Tuer was putting the finishing touches to Villona, who fought like a devil from hell."

"Very good," said Michael. "So much for Clagett."

Willie drew his cutlass and made it whistle. "Death to all Castle informers!" he bellowed, and Tuer O'Brien followed suit with the bellowing and the whistling cutlass.

"Easy, easy, boys," said Mahony, looking at them with distaste.

Michael got his purse from under the mattress and distributed the guineas, and finally Willie and Tuer were ushered out by Mahony.

Regis Donnell's trial was "short and sweet," as all the proponents of Dublin Castle boasted proudly. As a matter of fact, it was to all intents and purposes drumhead, and Regis was sentenced to hang in two weeks' time. The back-country people of Ireland were now rudderless. The famous Captain Martin was hardly more than a legendary figure in far-off Dublin, or maybe already taken or dead. He had certainly disappeared.

Meanwhile, the Lord-Lieutenant's men combed Dublin—in fact, all of Ireland—for one Captain Martin, and late one night, to everybody's horrified surprise, old Mahony began to bawl the *Highwayman's Song*, their agreed warning, on the pavement in front of Nine Steps, and Big Tom could not believe his ears. What—the Lord-Lieutenant's men at last after all these years?

And now as Big Tom beat on the Chinese gong in the hall, there was a scurrying through the place like rats in a barn, and a banging

of doors and a clatter of boot-heels; and when the Lord-Lieutenant's men appeared, pale and nervous, with pistols cocked and sabres bared, taking no chances in this macabre hell of the deepest stews, there were only a few ragged men at the bars, and a few playing cards quietly, sucking on old pipes, and a few rolling dice, sailors from the quays mostly—and no real prey at all: not even a low pimp or pickpocket wanted for escaping from gaol.

No one spoke a word to the Lord-Lieutenant's men. Big Tom followed them about calmly, smoking a short clay pipe and spitting contemptuously from time to time. And the Lord-Lieutenant's men were not quite so thorough here as elsewhere. Clagett's end had not gone unremarked, and not one of the Lord-Lieutenant's men had the least desire to face his Maker. They left with a clatter of warlike sabres.

You would think that a man of Lord Clonmel's delicate nurturing would be appalled by Nine Steps, but this was not the fact. He looked at everything with deep interest, and he seemed to be especially taken with Big Tom, the ex-heavyweight champion of Ireland, James Mahony, the ex-pirate, and particularly with Michael's place of hiding, the Fort.

Michael's latest project had come to him in a dream, and on waking, he had leapt violently out of bed, in spite of his game leg, and danced about, shouting: "Tom, get Trim, Mahony—right away! I've got the most wonderful idea in the world!"

And now Michael broached his project to Clonmel, who sat listening in stunned silence, taking a minute pinch of snuff from time to time; and when Michael was all through, he carefully brushed the front of his coat with a handkerchief and inquired: "And you yourself, Captain? Are you so anxious to hang, then?"

"Oh, I'll not hang," shouted Michael. "Don't give that a second thought."

Clonmel rose and began to mince about the room, flicking his handkerchief here and there, and finally, to Michael's surprise, he threw back his head and laughed as raucously as a parrot.

"I'll do it!" he cried.

"Good," said Michael. "Tonight."

Clonmel recoiled slightly. "So soon?"

"The sooner the better."

Now Clonmel turned and studied Michael's face for a long while.

"There is no way I could refuse, Captain. I tell you, the duel with Hood endeared you to me for ever."

At eight o'clock that evening a sumptuous, crested, six-horse coach, with liveried postilion, driver, and boot, was admitted at the big gate of Dublin Castle, but halted inside by red-coated guards.

Clonmel leaned out and screamed at them: "Stand aside, boobies! What—stop Lord Clonmel?"

The guards paled and glanced into the coach. In the far corner sat a monk in a dirty habit and cowl. Clonmel slapped the captain of the guard across the face with a document. "Here," he shouted;

" if you must make a nuisance of yourself. Permission for this monk to visit the prisoner Regis Donnell."

Shaking, the captain glanced at the document quickly by the light of a lantern, then handed it back. He turned and shouted into the darkness: " Pass them—ho! "

They were admitted to the wing of the prison by an obsequious warder, who led them down a dark corridor, with the monk following silently, his arms crossed in his sleeves, his face hidden by a huge, dirty, greasy cowl. At last they stopped at a great wooden door with a large grille in it, and Regis Donnell could be seen sitting on a palliasse in his shirt-sleeves, reading a book by candlelight. He looked up quickly.

" Mr. Donnell, sir," said the warder, his voice full of respect now, " here is Lord Clonmel, the Earl of Aire's son, bringing a reverend father for your comfort, sir."

Regis started and stared for a moment, but he was far from a fool, and realized at once that something was up, so he rose and said: " Why, excellent. Thank you, warder."

And then Clonmel and the monk were admitted, the door was locked, and the warder walked heavily back down the corridor. Regis stood staring at Lord Clonmel, and then Michael lowered the cowl, and Regis was so amazed that he staggered back and reached for the wall.

" Good lord, man," he gasped, " what are you doing here, Mick? You'll hang if they catch you."

And Michael said abruptly: " In a little while you will put on this habit and walk out of here with Lord Clonmel."

Regis paled slightly and a wild hope showed in his eyes; then his face stiffened, and he set his jaw. " No. I'll be damned if I will. I'll not see you hanged for me, you rash fool! "

" Everything is arranged," said Michael patiently, deeply pleased by Regis's reaction. " Clonmel will see you to the Continent personally."

" In fact," said Clonmel, giggling nervously, " I'm in as much of a hurry to get away now as you yourself, Donnell."

" No," said Regis quietly. " I will not."

" You will," cried Michael, " if I have to beat the living hell out of you—and then tell the warder the monk has fainted dead away and must be carried out."

" No, Mick. I could never live so, thinking I was responsible for your hanging."

" And then I'd be responsible for yours! " cried Michael. " And besides, my boy, they will never hang me."

Regis looked at him blankly. " What's this? "

" I'll be got out," laughed Michael. " Don't worry about that. The arrangements have already started."

Regis turned to Clonmel. " Is this true? "

" Yes," said Clonmel, " it's true. It's a damned chancy business. But it's true."

Regis still hesitated, deeply troubled.

" And now will you stop holding one of your old meetings and go before you get us all caught—and that would be a pretty thing, wouldn't it? " shouted Michael so vehemently that Clonmel put a hand on his arm to quiet him.

Regis, shaking, reached for the habit, and Clonmel helped him put it on. " Mick, you've surprised me, man. You've surprised me. God bless you, Mick—and the first boy we have will be called Michael Martin Donnell."

Now Michael rapped loudly for the warder, and when they heard him coming down the corridor, Michael blew out the candle and lay down on the palliasse in his shirt-sleeves.

The key grated, the door swung open. " He has fallen into a deep sleep," said Clonmel, " and here, my man, is ten guineas for your understanding services."

And the warder almost bowed to the ground—ten guineas, what munificence!—and bowing and cringing, he ushered Lord Clonmel and the reverend father to the door.

Michael lay with his arms under his head, staring up at the ceiling. " Ah well," he told himself, " it's no worse than the Fort, at that."

But in the morning there was hell to pay. Whistling blithely, a day warder unlocked the door of Regis's cell and entered, carrying a tray of food.

" Morning, sir," he chirped.

" Morning," said Michael, smiling.

And the warder stared like a man in a nightmare, and then he ran out into the corridor, leaving the cell door ajar, and looked at the other cells, then he rushed back and stared blankly at Michael, who stood grinning at him; and finally he locked Michael in the cell and went screaming down the corridor as if all the devils in hell were after him.

And now the venerable Castle was forced to release the news that the Great Rebel and Traitor, Regis Donnell, had escaped, but the bulletin went on to state that his reapprehension was expected in a matter of hours. Then the next day a new bulletin was issued: the Great Highwayman and Thief, Michael Martin, referred to vulgarly as Captain Lightfoot, had been captured after a wild chase by men of the Lord-Lieutenant's personal forces, and was now incarcerated in Dublin Castle and would shortly be tried for his life.

But the bulletins did not achieve their object. Gossip spreads in Ireland like fire in straw. The truth of the matter was soon known even in the Aran Islands, and a roaring defiant laugh went up over the whole country.

Oh, that Lightfoot! He was the boy for you!

Michael was arraigned before an old, deaf, hard-eyed magistrate who used an ear-trumpet. Angus Desmond, the factor from Ballymoure, urged on by Lord Devereaux, whose old friend Crewe, the Lord-Lieutenant, was in such a pickle at the Castle, identified Michael and gave evidence against him.

Nothing more was needed, and at last the magistrate said:

"This prisoner, Michael Martin, vulgarly known as Captain Lightfoot, is to be held for trial on the capital offence of armed robbery on the highway. Dismissed."

Michael heard a sympathetic murmur, and turned. An ugly little warder he hadn't seen before was looking at him with anguished eyes. As Michael passed him on his way out, the warder slipped him a note.

Once in his cell, Michael looked eagerly at it. It read: *A. disappeared with the strong-box. Mystery. T.*

From Trim! Good lord, what did it mean? They needed that money for the bribing of guards.

He fell on his palliasse and took his head in his hands. Things were not working out as his optimistic nature had led him to expect.

After his morning meal next day, Michael was moved into the wing of the prison reserved for common criminals. Regis's cell had been a tolerable one, but there was certainly nothing like it to be found in the old, dungeonlike part of the Castle down whose dank, sweating stone corridors Michael was now walking, manacled, between two powerful warders.

Michael stood in the miserable twilight of the narrow cell, looking about him with distaste.

"Ah well," he said, "it won't be long, one way or another," and he moved over below the slitted window and looked up at the feeble ray of sunshine cutting diagonally across the gloom.

Where had the crazy girl got to with the guineas? Was she the kind who ran off when there was trouble?

Michael doubted it very much, and yet you could never be quite sure of a woman. But the warder's message had heartened him. He had friends.

That evening, one of the warders handed him a second note. It read: *A. had ideas of her own. All's well. T.*

Michael was tried before Mr. Justice Banks, and his trial was as summary as Regis's—cynically so. Legally it was a very simple matter: Michael's word against the word of Lord Devereaux's steward. The fact that all the money had been returned to Desmond by Regis was considered irrelevant by the judge, as he stated in his summing-up.

It was all over in the space of an afternoon, and Michael was sentenced forthwith to hang within two weeks' time.

And Michael soon found that all was *not* well—far from it. At the conclusion of the trial the head warder was assigned to the job of guarding Michael closely until he was hanged. Apparently the Castle was taking no chances.

The head warder was a huge, brutal-looking man, well over six feet and very wide in the beam, with a shock of coarse, curly blond hair and a pale, square face of outsized ruggedness. He had fists as big as hams, and he seemed to take an instant dislike to Michael and handled him roughly in front of the other warders, cursed him for a damned Irish peasant, and even tried to kick him.

He was a man of uncertain origins, by the name of Grimshaw; what he was—English, Scottish, Welsh—nobody knew. He was well hated in the prison, and also feared. He watched Michael's cell all day long from a chair halfway down the corridor, and at night he slept at the same spot on a mattress put out for him; he even had his meals in the corridor.

There were no more notes.

. . . And now the big clock at the Castle ticked off the minutes inexorably, like a dispassionate second tolling the count for duellists. "No turning back now," the clock seemed to be saying. "The die is cast. There is no stopping the remorseless passage of time." And Michael tried not to listen to the gloomy bing-bong of the clock as it struck the hours, one by one.

. . . Two days, two nights left, and Michael was restlessly pacing his cell like a big cat in the zoo. He heard the Castle clock strike eleven, then twelve.

Suddenly there was a banging at his cell door, and Michael saw a face looking in at him through the small grille.

"How goes the night, rebel?" the face asked, then there was a jeering laugh.

Grimshaw! Michael made no reply.

"I think I caught you weeping," jeered Grimshaw. "The great Captain Lightfoot snivelling in his cell. Ah, what a jest! What a tale to tell later."

Now Michael lost his head completely and began to rage round his cell and kick his door like a demented man and scream insults that flashed and coruscated and were like the blows from a whip.

Turning, Grimshaw called down the corridor: "Mullins, bring me the butt. The Captain's gone mad, and needs taming."

Michael pressed his face to the grille, a terrible joy in his heart. "Only open this door," he wanted to shout. "Just for one second —then to hell with the hanging!"

Dimly through the small grille he saw a warder hand Grimshaw a short, ugly black whip with a heavy, leaded butt.

And now Grimshaw unlocked Michael's cell door, then jumped back quickly as Michael came raging out into the corridor.

Grimshaw, five or six inches taller than Michael and much broader, stood with his legs apart and the whip ready for a blow as Michael crouched before him, eyeing him, feinting, ready for the do-or-die rush.

And then . . . Grimshaw's left eyelid was lowered briefly, and Michael stared and there was a passing inner shock and he wondered for a moment which of them was mad . . . and then it happened again. There was a wild joy in Michael's heart. "All's well!" Trim's note had stated. "All's well."

Now Grimshaw grabbed him by the collar and hustled him down the corridor past the other cells. And finally they were at the head of the spiral stairway with the iron hand-rail which led down to the deep dungeons, and Michael heard a violent, metallic rattling that

puzzled him, and then Grimshaw released him and said: "The landing. Hit me! Hit me!"

And Michael swung from the waist, and his right fist landed with a terrible impact on Grimshaw's unprotected chin, and a look of wild surprise showed in the big man's eyes for a moment, and then slowly he sank to the floor, sat down, stared foolishly, and lay back with a sigh, unconscious.

Michael rushed down the spiral stairway, stumbling and almost falling in his haste. The small metal door on the landing was being taken off its hinges from the outside. Sweat poured from Michael as he waited, looking about him warily from time to time.

And finally the door gave, with a violent, wrenching sound that sent long, sinister echoes through the corridors, and then the blunt end of a big oaken four-by-six made its appearance, and at last the door was bent back far enough for Michael to slip through.

He found himself in a narrow stone gallery. Mahony was holding a torch at the far end of it, and Tuer O'Brien and Willie the Goat, who had just demolished the door, were hurrying down the corridor towards the torch.

Near the door Trim was standing with a pistol in his hand; and just beyond him was a slim boy with cropped black hair, also holding a pistol. Now the torch was put out.

"Down the gallery, Captain," cried Trim, giving Michael a gentle push. "I'll cover you."

In a few hurried paces Michael encountered the mysterious boy. A small, slim hand reached out and took one of his, and a light, familiar voice whispered eagerly: "Mick."

"Good lord! Ara!" cried Michael, staggered. "And what in heaven's name have you done to your beautiful hair, girl?"

But Ara pushed him ahead of her down the gallery.

In a moment Michael encountered another demolished door, and then he slipped through into a space so large that, owing to his long confinement, he was startled and momentarily frightened by it. But he noticed a faint winking overhead—stars, for the love of heaven!

He was clear, free, out in the open air once more. He saw dark shapes moving up ahead of him, and followed them. Ara was hurrying on his left, taking three steps to his one. And Trim was behind with a cocked pistol, covering the escape.

And now they came to a dark courtyard, and Michael saw the towers of Dublin Castle looming back to his right, with a few lighted windows here and there, and he wanted to shout and leap in his wild delight; but at that moment he noted a great wall rising directly in front of him, and as he hesitated and stared up, a hand reached out of the darkness and he was hustled through a breach in the wall and found himself in a pitch-dark roadway, and off to his right he heard a concourse of horses and men, and before him he could see a few dim lights and the shapes of houses and trees.

Ara came through the breach, then Trim; and at once there was

a great bustle and grunting and scraping as the breach was plugged with a piece of planking that loomed like an upturned raft in the darkness, and the planking was braced with oaken four-by-sixes anchored in the mud.

Michael made for the horses, hoping to find his black thoroughbred—once astride that wonderful animal, no one could overhaul him.

But Ara pulled him back and whispered: "No! No!"

And now an alarm bell began to ring in the Castle, and they could hear a scurrying of men and loud shouts of: "This way! Out this way!"

And Michael cried impatiently: "And why the blazing hell are we standing here?"

Many running feet, hitting the earth out of time, could be heard clattering across the back courtyard now, and one man, swifter than the rest, reached the wall and began to work at and kick against the breach-plug.

At this moment there was great activity among the horses and men down by the wall. Michael heard Tuer O'Brien shouting in a loud, raucous voice: "South, Captain. South does it. The rendezvous in Wicklow. South!"

And now the cavalcade started off, southward along by the wall, with an uproar of shouting and hoofbeats, and, covered by the great clattering, Trim and Ara drew Michael across the road and into the shadows.

"In heaven's name—" Michael began.

But Trim hissed: "The decoys, Captain. The decoys."

And now, as if they could see perfectly in the dark, they led him down an alley and in at a gate and through a courtyard and out at another gate, then down another alley and through another gate and across another courtyard until Michael was completely bewildered, like a man in a maze, and allowed himself to be led along like a child. And finally they came out into a wide alley beyond which loomed some tall, dark houses, and they were admitted into the servants' entrance of a big mansion, and a silent flunkey led them through a vast cellar, lit only by a few dim lamps, and up a front stairway to an immense entrance hall where one tall candle was burning on a table.

Two flunkeys were standing at attention on the opposite sides of a big doorway, and Lord Clayton was pacing up and down nervously between them in a greatcoat, mopping his brow with a big white silk handkerchief, and as they all emerged, he turned and shouted: "Thank God!"

No one wasted any time talking. A flunkey brought Michael a magnificent cavalry greatcoat and helped him into it, then handed him an officer's helmet with a red crest, and a sword-belt and sabre.

Ara was also getting into a greatcoat, as was Trim.

Through the glass of the huge front door, Michael could see a big coach waiting with postilion, driver, and boot.

"Ara! Your hair!" cried Michael, and Lord Clayton glanced at him in irritation.

A young man just saved from hanging worrying about his wife's hair! Wouldn't it grow?

"Don't you think I make a wonderful boy?" Ara demanded. "There is only one thing; or rather, two. That's why I wear the loose jacket."

Lord Clayton gave a delighted whinny, and Michael stared about him with compressed lips. Oh, there'd soon be a stop put to this sort of thing!

Now they hurried down the big front steps, where Michael found the black horse waiting for him. He mounted. Trim mounted the roan.

Ara rode inside the coach with Lord Clayton. The postilion gave a shout; the driver cracked his whip, and they made off northward through the sleeping streets of Dublin.

Michael rode knee to knee with Trim, who was wearing a corporal's rig. "Why did you let Ara take such chances?" he demanded.

With a sigh Trim replied: "How could I prevent it, Captain?"

Michael fell silent. True, all too true.

"Besides," said Trim after a moment, "she recruited Lord Clayton, and that was the crux of the matter."

"I see," said Michael, compressing his lips again. He thought he had detected an air of undue familiarity between Clayton and Ara.

And soon they had left Dublin far behind and were driving through the open country, and after a while Michael turned his horse over to Trim and got into the coach with Lord Clayton and Ara.

The old Lord was asleep in the corner, worn out by days of anxiety, and Ara was in another corner, as wide awake as if it were broad morning.

She was humming to herself and looking out at the dark, rolling countryside, lit only by the stars. Michael took off his helmet and his sword, and sat for some time with his arm around Ara and her head on his shoulder.

"Weren't you proud of me, Mick?" she asked.

"No," said Michael. "My impulse was to give you a good spanking. You might have been killed."

"I liked it," said Ara bluntly. "I wanted to prove to myself that I was truly Doherty's daughter."

"Oh," said Michael. "I thought it was to get me out of prison."

Ara laughed and pinched his ear and kissed him, then she said casually: "That, too, Mick."

And the well-sprung coach swayed gently, and there was the monotonous, unending clatter of hoofs, soothing as a lullaby, and after a while they both fell into a doze, clinging to each other, while the exhausted old Lord snored dolefully in his corner.

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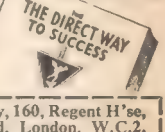

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Trim, on horseback at the coach window, woke them all. It was still black night.

Trim waved a long arm. "There's bivouac fires spread for a mile up there along the road, and though it's three o'clock, the market-town up ahead has got lights all over it. I don't understand it. Shall I ride on ahead?"

"We could turn back and take a side road," suggested Clayton wearily, coughing in the morning chill, then yawning.

"No," said Michael. "A coach such as this on a side road is a very suspicious thing. Let's chance it, whatever it is."

He kissed Ara quickly, then buckled on his sword, picked up his helmet, got down, and mounted the black horse that Trim was holding for him.

They moved slowly into the market-town, where Michael noticed that the side streets were patrolled by dragoons but completely empty otherwise. With a wave of his arm, he led the coach from the main road, and shouting: "Make way for Lord Clayton's coach! Make way!" he tried to force a passage down a side street, but half a dozen dragoons quickly blocked his way and stopped the coach.

Michael screamed at them: "This is Lord Clayton's coach, boobies! Make way!"

But a dragoon said, "Sorry, sir. Orders. All traffic is to be cleared through the main highway. No exceptions. Sorry, sir."

Lord Clayton yelled from the coach: "Who's in command here?"

"Colonel Bascomb, sir."

Clayton gave a loud laugh.

"What—Whisky Billy? Take this to him, and you'll hurry, my man, if you know what's good for you. Sir William is an old friend of mine."

"Yes, sir," said the sergeant, saluting.

"Meanwhile, we'll stay where we are."

"Yes, sir."

They waited in silence. Then there was a clattering and hollering, and a small group of horsemen turned the corner with a little turkey-cock of a man leading. All the dragoons stiffened and stared at the stars, rigid as ramrods. A bustling aide helped the little turkey-cock of a man to dismount: Colonel Sir William Bascomb. He was drunk and strutting.

"Ah Binny, is it you?" he cried, looking into the coach.

"Yes, yes," said Lord Clayton impatiently, "and they've stopped me, and I'm in a great hurry to get to Belfast."

"My orders. Iron orders. Sorry, old man. In a hurry, you say? When I was handed your card, I was hoping you could stay for a while and drink with me till this silly business is over. One gets tired of sycophantic underlings. I say, can't you stay?"

"Impossible. I'm behindhand now, Billy. What the devil is going on?"

"Oh, those idiots at the Castle have let their number-one man

get away from them. First Donnell. Now Martin. Utterly ridiculous. If I was governor of the prison, I guarantee there'd be no escapes. Ah Binny, can't you stay? "

" Sorry, Billy."

" Well . . . I suppose I'd better let you pass on. Not even one drink—a stirrup-cup, Binny? "

" Sorry, old man. Sorry."

And so they passed on, escorted by the sergeant, and Whisky Billy stood in the dust of the roadway, regretfully looking after the big coach.

And so Lord Clayton and party passed on unremarked to Belfast. It was dawn when they arrived, and the still water of the Lough was dark greenish, with faint glazes of pink and gold from the rising sun. A mild west wind was blowing.

The ship was ready to sail, and there was only space for a brief good-bye. Lord Clayton, more than a little upset, shook hands with Michael and said: " Good-bye, lad, and good luck. And for me, it's good-bye to Ireland for ever. I'm taking the Liverpool boat at ten."

And then he kissed Ara on the cheek and caressed her, somewhat unnecessarily, Michael thought, compressing his lips again; and at last Michael and Ara were aboard, and the *Northern Star* drew away slowly, and Belfast seemed to be moving rather than themselves, and Lord Clayton waved and waved and finally turned away with a despairing shrug.

And now Michael and Ara stood alone, holding hands.

" I am glad to see the last of Clayton," said Michael finally.

Ara glanced at him, then laughed lightly. " Oh, we needed him, Mick. Mick, do you know we haven't but a little over two hundred guineas to our name? "

" So? " said Michael indifferently. " Where did it all go? "

" Roughly," said Ara, " thirty-three hundred guineas to Lady Anne. That was Anne's share—one third. And six thousand to Binny for the bribery and for himself—didn't have a guinea to his name, poor old man! Even so, he didn't want to be mixed up in it, but I persuaded him."

" I thought as much," said Michael coldly.

" Oh Mick—it was no more than a little cuddling. I could twist him round my finger."

Michael was silent for a long time. Finally, he said: " Ara—you're a wicked girl."

" Yes," said Ara, " it's true. And as for you, Mick—you are not a wicked man at all. You are just a creature of circumstance."

And now, little by little, they sailed into the fog-bank, and as the *Northern Star* of Belfast was slowly swallowed up by the dense white fog of the North Channel, Michael Martin, sometimes called Captain Lightfoot, silently disappeared from history's stage and was heard of no more.

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PRIZE-WINNERS OF CROSSWORD NO. 17

We are pleased to announce the five winners of Argosy's seventeenth Prize Crossword Competition:—

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Mrs. E. M. Loughlin, Milford Road, Elstead, Surrey.

W. H. Makin, Esq., Melrose Avenue, Bolton, Lancs.

These readers who sent in the first correct solutions to be checked on the closing date, each receive a one-guinea book token.

SOLUTION

Across. 1, *Coventry*. 5, *Useful*. 9, *Red-hot poker*. 11, *Set*. 12, *Yankees*. 13, *Almoner*. 15, *Arable*. 17, *Elected*. 19, *Oranges*. 21, *Ashore*. 24, *Riposte*. 25, *Happier*. 27, *Sir*. 28, *Assignation*. 29, *Nieces*. 30, *Inclines*.

Down. 1, *Curry favour*. 2, *Vedanta*. 3, *Noose*. 4, *Repose*. 6, *Strumpets*. 7, *Fastnet*. 8, *Lot*. 10, *Kraken*. 14, *Red herrings*. 16, *Legislate*. 18, *Osiers*. 20, *Asperse*. 22, *Opinion*. 23, *Shogun*. 26, *Pearl*. 27, *Sin*.

PRIZE CROSSWORD NO. 20

Argosy's twentieth Prize Crossword Competition appears on page 144. There will be one-guinea book tokens for the first five correct solutions checked on the closing date. If you do not wish to cut Argosy, copy your solution on to a plain sheet of paper, adding your name and address in capital letters. Entries should be completed *in ink*, and posted to: ARGOSY PRIZE CROSSWORD (No.20), 3 Pilgrim Street, London, E.C.4 (Comp.), to arrive by Thursday, January 6th, the closing date.

We regret that entry must be limited to readers living in Great Britain, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, and Eire. There is no entry fee and the Editor's decision is final.

Names of the prize-winners in this competition and the solution will appear in the issue of Argosy on sale March 10th

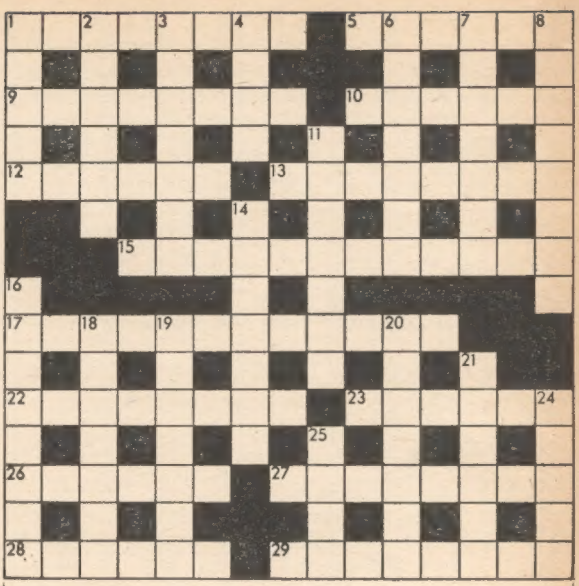
PRIZE CROSS WORD

No. 20

★

Rules of Entry on Page 143

★



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CUT ALONG THE LINE

CLUES

Across

1 H is like a sea-rover (8).

5 Two bell-bottoms make a barbarian (6).

9 A ring around the hop-drier creates another form of cookery (8).

10 Various men under the sea (6).

12 When the bird loses its head it can still roll about (6).

13 The burying-place is a contribution to feline hair-dressing (8).

15 A mercenary standard of virtue (2, 4, 2, 4).

17 Proverbially incapable of making "Beautiful, beautiful Soup" (3, 4, 5).

22 Race? Not 1, is the response (8).

23 Disordered charts provide a stiffener (6).

26 In cold surroundings, I do produce an imbecility (6).

27 "Belike they will raise thee to Ressaldar when I am hanged in ——" (Kipling) (8).

28 The tomboy starts with a little ship and ends in a lair (6).

29 The motor goes north to an associate, unspiritually (8).

Down

1 It flies through the air, but can also have a root (5).

2 Uncrowned kings or unseen gates may be (6).

3 Even when iron they are edible (7).

4 I'm in an explosive—so colourful (4).

6 Nails round a graduate become living creatures (7).

7 It takes a lot more to produce a musical effect (7).

8 Tennyson ranked Maud as queen among these (8).

11 Do you keep an orchestra in this? (7).

14 "Time, not ——, hath conquer'd thee" (Arnold) (7).

16 Give one sea-creature a leading part and you get another (8).

18 A little work goes to town in darkness (7).

19 This diplomat's a hard case (7).

20 "Born in the garret, in the —— bred" (Byron) (7).

21 It sounds an unkind sort of needlework (6).

24 Nelson's novelist captain? (5).

25 The girl's genuine, I'll aver (4).

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PRACTICAL RESULTS

Student 357/3015: I have had my story accepted by **BLACKWOODS** who are paying me £25 for it . . . *Student* 778/2119: I thought it might interest you to know that **THE COUNTRYMAN** has accepted a short article of mine on an old country custom . . . *Student* 184/315: As you suggested, I submitted the articles to the **NEW STATESMAN.** One was published on the 17th July. I have also had an article accepted by **MEN ONLY** . . . *Student* 181/282: You may be interested to hear that I had a letter from the Editor of **ARGOSY**; they offered me Twenty-five Guineas for my story . . . *Student* 591/287: You will be pleased that my article submitted for my Second Lesson was published in the **DAILY MIRROR** and I received Six Guineas for it . . . *Student* 120/288: I have established contact with the Editor of **PUNCH.** The item was accepted for "Charivaria" and is a good start . . . *Student* 1179/347: I succeeded in getting four Big Game stories into **COURIER** and another about "Shrove Tuesday." Another article appeared in the August issue of **BLACKWOODS** . . . *Student* 1954/157: I have just corrected a proof of my story for **WIDE WORLD**: they have since accepted another and I have sent in a third . . . *Student* 171/162: I have sold my story to **EVERYWOMAN** for 25 guineas . . . *Student* 1106/156: The B.B.C. accepted the script for the Light Programme—fee 9 guineas—after my first lesson . . . *Student* 141/76: The article which I wrote for the Second Test paper appeared in the **SUNDAY MAIL.** Thanks for the recommendation.